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WEAPONIZED NEWS:

RUSSIAN TELEVISION, STRATEGIC NARRATIVES AND CONFLICT REPORTING

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DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

Russia has been involved in two major geopolitical conflicts in recent years: the Ukraine crisis and the civil war in Syria. Since Russia's involvement in the Ukraine crisis in 2013-2014, many commentators have pointed to the effectiveness of the Russian strategic narratives to explain the support the Kremlin enjoys at home and abroad. Although Russia's use of information as a weapon is not new, in the light of the limited transparency of Russian strategic thinking, studying Russia's discursive environment and, in particular, strategic narratives becomes critical. Therefore, the concept of strategic narrative plays a central role in assembling the main argument for this doctoral thesis. The concept provides a foundation for the analytical framework to explore a set of media frames purposefully embedded into television news to reinforce, subvert, undermine, overwhelm or replace a pre-existing discourse on a subject significant to both the audience and the 'speaker' that is often a political elite.

The main focus of the dissertation is on the visuals employed in the Russian television news, which have received surprisingly little scholarly attention to date. A starting point is the desire to obtain a deeper understanding of how the Russian government's complex and controversial political decisions are legitimized on television, and also, and most importantly, to determine what role images play in advancing the strategic narratives that justify violence, human costs and engagement in military conflicts. For that, I adopt three distinct perspectives. First is a comparative perspective, which contrasts the narratives produced for two different audiences — domestic and foreign. It also compares the strategic narratives constructed around two different conflicts — the military conflict in Eastern Ukraine and the civil war in Syria. Second is a retrospective perspective, which explores the narratives not only in terms of their current application but also as a process that has been evolving over a two-year period of time. Third, the dissertation employs a hybrid media perspective to explore the interactions between mainstream media and social media. These three perspectives, in combination, encompass a comprehensive and longitudinal investigation of Russian strategic narratives as a representation of the weaponized information. The combination of qualitative and quantitative methods adds 'depth' and 'breadth' dimensions to the dissertation's analytical spectrum.

The thesis represents a compilation of four articles. Each article illuminates one of three perspectives adopted in the dissertation. The articles highlight the results which demonstrate that the approach adopted in this dissertation is important for several reasons. First, while much of the media and international relations literature focuses on projection or reception of strategic narratives, there is almost no research which offers deep insights into strategic narrative as a process that can develop or be modified over the course of time to account for changes in political goals or target audiences. What happens to a dominant, established strategic narrative when the context changes? This dissertation aims to fill this gap by studying Russia's dominant strategic narratives in television news from comparative, retrospective and hybrid media perspectives. Second, this dissertation argues that strategic narratives gain their power through images that invoke collective emotions and ideas, like sympathy or aversion while reinforcing existing political myths, cultural stereotypes and historical memory. Thus, the thesis conceptualises visual images as affective anchors that can be used to reactivate collective memory and dominant discourses and construct emotional relationships between the audiences and mediated events. Finally, wartime images studies anticipate, but rarely empirically examine the television images that are employed to mediate the contemporary conflicts. This dissertation extends the understanding of how the Russian television visually mediates the conflicts to advance the state's interpretation of the events and justify the country's involvement in the international conflicts to domestic and global audiences.

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LIST OF ORIGINAL PUBLICATIONS

This thesis is based on the following publications:

I Khaldarova I (2016) Strategic narratives of the Ukraine conflict projected for domestic and international audiences by Russian TV channels. In: M. Pantti (ed) *Media and the Ukraine Crisis: Hybrid Practices and Narratives of Conflict*. New York: Peter Lang, pp.123–138.

II Khaldarova I and Pantti M (2016) Fake news: The narrative battle over the Ukrainian conflict. *Journalism Practice* 10(7): 891–901. DOI: [http:// dx.doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2016.1163237](http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2016.1163237).

III Khaldarova I (2019) Brother or Other? Transformation of strategic narratives in Russian television news during the Ukrainian crisis. *Media, War & Conflict*. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750635219846016>.

IV Grigor I and Pantti M (2020, forthcoming, accepted by *Russian Journal of Communication*) Visual images as affective anchors: Strategic narratives in Russia's Channel One coverage of the Syrian and Ukrainian conflicts.

The publications are referred to in the text by their roman numerals.

*The family name of the thesis author has been recently changed. Therefore, while the first three articles are published with her previous family name - **Khaldarova**, this thesis an

1 INTRODUCTION: STORY MATTERS

Russia has been involved in two major geopolitical conflicts in recent years: the crisis in Ukraine and the civil war in Syria. In Ukraine, the crisis includes the Euromaidan protests 2013-2014, an overthrow of the government, the loss of a part of Ukraine's territory (annexation of Crimea) and the violent, still ongoing military conflict where the Ukrainian government forces confront the separatist militias backed by the Kremlin (Cottle, 2016; Thomson, 2017). I use the term 'crisis' to encompass all these events while considering the situation in Ukraine in a wider context (Szostek, 2018a; Valuch and Hamulák, 2018). The official Kyiv and the West continue accusing Russia of interference in the Ukraine crisis and, in particular, supporting the military forces of the separatist republics. The Russian government, however, denies its involvement (Freedman, 2019).

In September 2015, Russia intervened militarily in Syria following a formal request by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's government. Russia officially justified its intervention as an intention to support the Assad regime as part of the global campaign against terrorism. In terms of international politics, both the crisis in Ukraine and Russia's military operation in Syria led to a heightened confrontation between Russia and Ukraine and the worst relations between Russia and the US and Europe since the early 1980s, when that relationship was driven by bitter superpower rivalry (Charap and Shapiro, 2015; Trenin, 2014).

In addition, both conflicts have been accompanied by remarkable campaigns in the Russian media to mobilize public support for the interventions. The conflicts trigger claims that Russia has raised information war to a new level, as it effectively manages national and international perceptions of these conflicts through its use of mainstream media and by controlling internet discussions (Allen and Moore, 2018; Hammond-Errey, 2019; Hoskins and O'Loughlin, 2015; Hutchings and Szostek, 2015; Jensen, 2018; Lucas and Pomeranzev, 2016; Moore, 2019; Roman et al., 2017; Rugge, 2018). Since relations between Russia and other states continue to be tense and complex, information warfare has become a serious security concern globally, but especially to the 'frontline states': Poland, the Baltic states, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Ukraine (Lucas and Pomeranzev, 2016). Academics and politicians explore contemporary information warfare strategies with increasing interest to critically assess the strategies' role and potential capacity in geopolitical conflicts, international relations and domestic policies (Butler, 2010; Cottiero et al., 2015; De Graaf et al. 2015; Kenneth, 2017; Robin, 2005; Roger, 2013; Szostek, 2018a; Kuzio, 2019).

In this context, **strategic narratives** have come to the fore **as an instrument used by political actors to construct a nexus of political activities and messages within a compelling narrative framework advanced through the media and aimed at positing a particular version of events** (Miskimmon et al., 2017), **gaining legitimacy** (Roselle, 2006) **and cultivating public support** (Brown, 2005; Dimitriu, 2012). The concept of strategic narratives plays a central role in assembling the main argument for this dissertation by providing the foundation of the analytical framework used to study the discursive environment in which political elites operate, manage public expectations and wield their influence (Roselle et al., 2014).

Russia has long been credited with having significant information warfare capabilities (Iasiello, 2017) and using them through agitation and propaganda to mobilize its population (Kenez, 1985). The literature provides an insight into how modern Russian information warfare stems from Soviet propaganda techniques that relied heavily on strategic narratives, disinformation and isolation (Allen and Moore, 2018; Iasiello, 2017; Jack, 2017; Kragh and Åsberg, 2017; Kuzio, 2019). Some scholars argue that Russia continues to use Soviet-style propaganda practices, merely adapting them to the contemporary context (Galeotti, 2016, 2017; Giles, 2016), while others suggest that Russian information warfare is now much more sophisticated and intense (Lucas and Pomeranzen, 2016; Roudakova, 2017). Thus, although Russian government's use of information as a weapon is not new (Allen and Moore, 2018; Bouwmeester, 2017; Giles, 2016), studying Russia's discursive environment and especially its strategic narratives has become critical, given the limited transparency of Russian strategic thinking.

Russian television holds a key position in advancing the strategic narratives of the government. There are two main rationales explaining this specific type of authorities-population interaction in Russia. First, the relationship between media and power in modern Russia is often characterized by state paternalism (Kiriya, 2019) and tight control implemented through financial and administrative regulations of media owners and journalists (Voinova, et al., 2007), especially when it comes to the national TV (Dunn, 2014; Hutchings and Rulyova, 2009). The particular interplay of economic and political factors creates the environment, where the media plays a role of an 'obedient child' (Vartanova, 2013: p. 109) and causes de-professionalisation of journalism which occurs when the mass media products are increasingly used for political purposes (Roudakova, 2017).

Second, television remains the main news source for roughly 85% of the Russian population (Volkov, 2016). Szostek (2018b) claims that the strategic narratives broadcast on state-run Russian television have 'power' or

resonance among diverse domestic audiences, even those who distrust state media and turn to alternative sources. In the same vein, Cottiero et al. (2015) conclude that the role of television in Russia is so significant that there is no discernible difference between opinions shared by television viewers and internet users. Indeed, the rapid expansion of the internet and social media has made it more difficult to impose hegemonic narratives or framings of the conflicts (Hoskins and O'Loughlin, 2015; Kaempf, 2013; Roselle et al., 2014). Nevertheless, the Russian government tries to produce competing narratives and incorporate online users to reproduce and amplify the narratives originated in mainstream media (Jaitner and Mattsson, 2015; Mejias and Vokuev, 2017).

The news genre is especially important for the purpose of this research due to its ideological weight. Traditionally news is understood as important or urgent information delivered in a timely manner to people who want to know it (Bennett, 2016: p. 2). The television news in modern Russia represents a platform for promoting identity claims (Hutchings and Miazhevich, 2010: p. 179) and, through numerous repetitions, confirming and reinforcing them (Hutchings and Rulyova, 2009: p. 47). This approach, as well as the nexus of power and mainstream media in Russia, bolsters my rationale for selecting news to study strategic narratives advanced through the state-run television channels.

Despite the prominent position of mainstream television in Russia's media and political landscapes, there are two areas that have received surprisingly little scholarly attention to date. First is the strategic narratives constructed in television news. One important reason for that is the communicative complexity of television news, which is associated with its polysemic nature (Grabe and Bucy, 2009), in which visuals are intensively applied in tandem with text and audio underlays (Griffin, 2010; Trivundza, 2004; Wilkes, 2015). Second is the visuals that are selected to advance the strategic narratives in the news. At the same time, the power of visuals is greater today than ever before (Griffin, 2018). Rapidly developing digital technologies enable faster and easier production of images and their global dissemination. The combination of moving images and text is the most ubiquitous form of a message in modern media, and their highly complex interactions are especially important in coverage of conflicts and wars (Brantner et al., 2011; Parry 2010b). Excluding images from any analysis could lead to incomplete and even misleading conclusions.

Thus, **the present study aims to fill these gaps by focusing on the visual dimension of strategic narratives advanced by the Russian television news and presuming that image selection influences evaluation of a journalistic story.** The starting point of this study is the desire to obtain a deeper understanding of how the Russian government's complex and controversial political decisions are legitimized in

television news and to determine what role images play in advancing the strategic narratives. My goal is based first and foremost on the position that television images are an important mode of war reporting (Chouliaraki, 2006; Hoskins, 2004; Hoskins and O'Loughlin, 2007). Furthermore, scholars recognize the vital position of visuals in promoting strategic narratives during political and armed conflicts (Butler, 2010; Miskimmon et al., 2015; Mirzoeff, 2011; Virilio, 2002, 2009). Finally, valuable theoretical and empirical studies have particularly emphasised the crucial role that images play in influencing public responses to wars and inducing ideological sentiments (Fahmy and Kim, 2008; Michalski and Gow, 2007; Parry, 2010a; Seo and Ebrahim, 2016). Hence, my core research question is the following:

How does Russian television news visually advance the strategic narratives related to the Ukraine crisis and the civil war in Syria?

To answer this question and advance the existing knowledge about strategic narratives, I adopt three distinct perspectives. First is a comparative perspective, which contrasts the narratives produced for two different audiences — domestic and foreign. It also compares the strategic narratives constructed around two different conflicts — the military conflict in Eastern Ukraine and the civil war in Syria (Articles I and IV). Second is a retrospective perspective, which explores the narratives not only in terms of their current application but also as a culmination of a process that has been evolving over a two-year period of time (Article III). Third, the dissertation employs a hybrid media perspective to explore the interactions between mainstream media and social media and the spread of fake news (Article II). These three perspectives, in combination, encompass a comprehensive and longitudinal investigation of Russian strategic narratives as a representation of the weaponized information. The combination of qualitative and quantitative methods adds 'depth' and 'breadth' dimensions to the dissertation's analytical spectrum.

The approach adopted in this dissertation is important for several reasons. First, while much of the media and international relations literature focuses on projection or reception of strategic narratives, there is almost no research which offers deep insights into strategic narrative as a process that can develop or be modified over the course of time to account for changes in political goals or target audiences. What happens to a dominant, established strategic narrative when the context changes? This dissertation aims to fill this gap by studying Russia's dominant strategic narratives in television news from comparative, retrospective and hybrid media perspectives. Second, this dissertation argues that strategic narratives gain their power through images that invoke collective emotions and ideas, like sympathy or aversion while reinforcing existing political myths, cultural stereotypes and historical

memory. Thus, the thesis conceptualises visual images as affective anchors that can be used to reactivate collective memory and dominant discourses and construct emotional relationships between the audiences and mediated events. Finally, wartime images studies anticipate, but rarely empirically examine the television images employed to mediate the contemporary conflicts. This dissertation extends the understanding of how the Russian television visually mediates the conflicts to advance the state's interpretation of the events and justify the country's involvement in international conflicts to domestic and global audiences.

2. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY: ORIGINS OF INFORMATION WARFARE AND THE CONTEMPORARY MEDIA ENVIRONMENT IN RUSSIA

Russian information warfare has recently taken a central place in the scholarly analysis (Darczewska, 2014; Huhtinen et al., 2019; Kasapoglu, 2015; Lucas and Pomeranzev, 2016; Perry, 2015; Rácz, 2015; Snegovaya, 2015). Since strategic narratives are often described as part of information warfare (Nissen, 2013; Oates, 2014; Roselle, 2010), it is appropriate to begin with a description of the origins of information warfare and contemporary information politics in Russia. Building on existing research on the history of propaganda, communication policies, freedom of the press and online censorship in Russia, this chapter explores the practices of Soviet propaganda that have contributed to Russian information warfare and the current relationship between the Russian government and media, which has created favourable conditions for advancing the regime's strategic narratives.

I have identified three relevant spheres of power and media relations. The first pertains to propaganda and censorship routines rooted in Russian history (section 2.1). The second describes the state mechanisms of seizing control over key mass media players in contemporary Russia (section 2.2). The third concerns extending political filters to online information flows through legislative and technical frameworks (section 2.3). The chapter also provides brief summaries about two international conflicts – the Ukraine crisis and the Syrian civil war – that have triggered claims about new levels of Russian information warfare and provide the context for this study (sections 2.4).

2.1. HISTORY OF INFORMATION POLITICS IN RUSSIA: PROPAGANDA, MOBILIZATION AND CONTROL

Russian information warfare is hardly a new phenomenon. Some scholars argue that it is rooted in the country's history and national identity (Chotikul, 1986; Kenez, 1985; Simons and Strovsky, 2006; Thomas, 1998). Chotikul (1986) and Simons and Strovsky (2006) hold that the authoritarian traditions emerged as a result of Russia's severe climate and living conditions, along with the hardships related to an immense territory that was vulnerable to attacks on all sides. In this view, the rule of a strong totalitarian leader was the only way to unite people and survive under these circumstances, so a hierarchical political structure evolved.

This authoritarian political regime defines the functions of the media in society. In her work about the development of media control in Russia, Ognyanova (2010) discusses *Vedomosti*, the country's first newspaper. It was established in 1702 by Peter I the Great as a means of informing the population about his plans and aspirations. The newspaper was fully controlled by the monarch; he was its only editor and one of its most prolific contributors. Ognyanova (2010) stressed that, not unlike the press that appeared later in the Russian history, *Vedomosti* was never used to serve the citizens; its only goal was to popularize the current priorities of the country and its tsar. Ognyanova (2010) concludes that, in contrast to a Western press largely driven by market competition and private interests, Russian news media have always been primarily a political tool (p. 4).

The later traditions of propaganda and disinformation of the Soviet Union have also impacted today's Russian media structure (Allen and Moore, 2018; Iasiello, 2017; Jack, 2017; Kragh and Åsberg, 2017; Lucas and Pomeranzev, 2016; Snegovaya, 2015; Vartanova, 2013). Indeed, Soviet leaders placed an extraordinarily high value on using information for the purposes of political indoctrination and control (Taylor, 1998). This control, which came to be called 'reflexive control' in the Soviet view and within the Marxist-Leninist paradigm, is best exercised by purposefully influencing the inputs an individual receives from his or her environment through manipulation and management of perceptions (Bouwmeester, 2017; Chotikul, 1986: pp. 43–45; Huhtinen et al., 2019; Thomas, 2004). Thomas (2004: p. 253) defines reflexive control as a 'manipulation of thought processes'; it is similar to the Western concept of perception management but is arguably more than that, as it attempts not only to manipulate perceptions but also to control reactions to these manipulations. In other words, reflexive control involves creating a behavioural pattern or providing specially designed information, partial information or, most often, plain disinformation that causes an opponent to react in a predetermined fashion – as if by reflex – without realizing that he or she is being manipulated (Huhtinen et al., 2019; Thomas, 2004).

Vladimir Lefebvre, who Chotikul (1986) describes as having developed the concept of reflexive control in the 1960s, emphasizes that any information act deliberately designed for a specific purpose, provocation, intrigue and even calumny – or more generally a falsehood of any type – creates reflexive control. He believes it blurs the line between lie and truth and makes it extremely difficult to distinguish fabricated information from information that corresponds to reality (Bouwmeester, 2017). The trick is to mix everything up so that, in the end, the public cannot see the forest for the trees (Lefebvre, 2015). Reflexive control has also been identified as a range of systems, methods and tasks intended to influence the perception and behaviour of an enemy, a population or the international community on all

levels (Bouwmeester, 2017). In other words, it is a systemic approach based on the perception management that uses information to alter a target opponents' (or the public) orientation so that they make decisions favourable to the political regime's goals (Selhorst, 2016; Shemayev, 2007). Thus, beyond deception, reflexive control also embeds the strategic promotion of specific narratives and propaganda.

In contrast with the Western approach, the concept of propaganda in the Soviet Union was used in a positive sense, as more or less equivalent to enlightenment. In the third edition of the *Large Soviet Encyclopedia* (Prohorov, 1977: p. 172), the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) is defined as a people's ideological educator that conducts everyday propaganda and agitation activities, manages mass communication (press, television, radio, etc.) to make every communist follow the moral values stated in the Programme and CPSU Rules and inculcate these values in other workers. In addition, major addresses delivered by Lenin, Stalin, Khrushchev and other Soviet leaders to the Congresses of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (the Soviet regime's main political events) emphasized the central role of agitation and propaganda in the flourishing of Soviet Communist ideology (Barghoorn, 2015: p. 5).

Thus, in the Soviet tradition, propaganda was a legalized and institutionalized mode of communication between official agencies and the population, aimed at cultivating and promoting strategic narratives and political values. Hannah Arendt (1973) wrote that the goal of Soviet (and Nazi) propaganda was not persuasion but organization or, in the Soviet context, physical and emotional mobilization within a certain framework of ideas. Kotkin (2001) notes that everything in the Soviet Union was ultimately based on this kind of mass mobilization: the five-year (industrial) plans, collectivization, anti-religious and anti-illiteracy campaigns and the 'building of socialism' in the republics (p. 133). Kotkin (2001) defines mobilization as a government's powerful tactic of engaging people in activities through their emotional commitment to a certain idea. The only way to keep people constantly mobilized was the state's monopoly over mass media and strict and total control over the information that passed through media outlets (Bauer and Gleicher, 1953).

The mobilization of the entire population became the Soviet media's paramount official goal when the USSR was invaded by Nazi Germany (Berkhoff, 2012: p. 4). The image of family (Mother Russia / Motherland and Father Stalin) lay at the heart of the media's effort to nurture the most powerful form of patriotism by representing the war in personal and emotionally compelling terms. In her study of World War II propaganda, Lisa Kirschenbaum (2000) noted that figuring patriotism in terms of family ties enabled the linkage of markers of party loyalty with hometown nostalgia and, ultimately, people's own family and friends (p. 836). Similarly, Barber

(1993) pointed out that the practice of conflating the tragedies and interests of families and of the nation allowed Stalin's image to have an unquestionably crucial mobilizing effect during World War II. Among the most common tactics during the wartime was crafting reports about individual heroes and printing 'personal' letters in the press. The same strategy was visible in other forms of propaganda and wartime popular culture like posters, books and movies that linked family, hometown and nation (Kirschenbaum, 2000; Shin, 2015).

This approach, according to Kirschenbaum (2000), revealed an effort to represent the war in an emotionally authentic, if not factually accurate, way and to emphasize the degree to which the war could and should be understood by means of individuals' responses to it. 'Family' metaphors in Soviet times represented a salient layer of associations and emotional anchors (A'Beckett, 2012). The several republics in the USSR were 'brothers', while the USSR itself was often defined as *rodina-mat*, or 'motherland / mother-state' (Wierzbicka, 1996: p. 192). These familial terms were emotionally and ideologically loaded and became a symbol of the unity and loyalty of the Soviet Socialist Republics. The slogan 'fraternal solidarity with workers all over the world' was included in the Moral Codex of Communist Builders.

Indeed, the trauma from World War II is still used, sometimes to a remarkable extent, in the modern politics of Russia. The powerful legacy of that war still frames Russians' understanding of a conflict as a battle between 'good' and 'evil'. Through mediated memories and commemorative rituals, fiction, music and monuments that repeat, reinforce or renegotiate people's beliefs about wartime experiences, Russian strategic narratives have turned the trauma of war into stories that can be situated within the modern conventions of public display (Cronqvist and Sturfelt, 2018). On the one hand, this can be explained by the urgent need for the Russian authorities to find a common ideological background that could serve as a basis for the integration of the whole of Russian society after the Soviet Union collapsed (Polegkyi, 2016: p. 78). On the other, due to recently strident Russian demands to play a greater role in international politics, the symbolic capital of the victory over Nazi Germany in World War II is employed by the Russian government to strengthen Russia's position as a great power and to restore Russia's control over what is known as the 'near-abroad' (the areas near Russia that overlay fairly well with its traditional sphere of influence) (Polegkyi, 2016: p. 82).

Thus, the great power status manipulation also originates in the Soviet past. Having made a decisive contribution to the defeat of Hitler's Germany, the Soviet Union came out of the war as an undisputed global power (Pechatnov, 2010: p. 1), which meant both new opportunities and new challenges for Kremlin propaganda. The opportunities included a chance to

prove the Soviet ideological supremacy and promote this image far and wide. However, these opportunities could not be fully exploited due to the challenges posed by the ruined economy and exhausted populace of the post-war Soviet Union. State propaganda, mass culture, education and the work of the Soviet mass media in particular again became the central and most important resources of Stalin's government to organize people within the Soviet ideological framework (Brooks, 2000; Stites, 1999; Tumarkin, 1994). Orchestrated by the Department of Agitation and Propaganda of the Communist Party Central Committee (Agitprop) and the Communist Information Bureau (Cominform, established in 1947), the propaganda campaigns grew more sophisticated and diverse, constructing the strategic narratives about and mobilizing people against a new enemy represented by erstwhile Western allies (Shaw, 2001: p. 60).

Indeed, people's increasing post-war frustration demanded a scapegoat for the worsening conditions of life and political pressure. In *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev* (2009), Vladislav Zubok describes how Soviet propaganda managed to direct this frustration towards the Western countries. He writes that most Soviet citizens tended to believe the official propaganda that blamed the lack of immediate improvements in their lives on the former Western allies and, most importantly, revered Stalin more than ever as a great leader (p. 6). Zubok also emphasizes that Stalin successfully used the notions of the great power, collective glory and ritualistic mourning for the dead, all related to World War II, as central features of his Cold War propaganda. The cult of World War II allowed Stalin 'to carry out his foreign policy and to stamp out potential discontent and dissent at home' (p. 6).

Ivan Zassoursky (1999) points out that, shortly before the Soviet Union collapsed, the relationship between the media and government in Russia changed. Instead of being totally subordinated to the government, the media became dependent on various corporate players and oligarchic capital. Censorship was still prevalent, but the media started serving a number of different (and often contradictory) commercial interests. In the context of the Soviet Union, this was a new pluralistic phenomenon. During that period, newspapers experienced a striking drop in circulation and influence (Zassoursky, 1999). The government stopped subsidizing newspapers, which increased their prices and ruined their distribution system. Television, already an influential source, became the most powerful medium in the country (Ognyanova, 2010).

2.2. PUTIN'S RUSSIA: TIGHTENING CONTROL OVER MASS MEDIA

Vladimir Putin seems to be trying to rebuild a hierarchical and strongly centralized political system and re-activate the information strategies

originating in Russia's past. In 2001, the second year of his presidency, Putin signed a decree that fully re-established federal control over the entire national network of broadcasting and relay stations for television and radio signals. The state-owned Russian Television and Radio Broadcasting Network (RTRN) started controlling the broadcasting stations through regulating technical infrastructure, administrating financial operations and formally and informally influencing news flows (Vartanova, n.d.). By 2018, RTRN covered up to 98,4% of the Russian population with the first multiplex (an essential package of ten free on-air digital TV channels including Channel One, Russia-1 and NTV) (rtrs.ru, n.d.).

Also, the government agencies ensure that the state remains the key actor in defining the framework for the media business through policy-making and regulatory activities (Galkina and Lehtisaari, 2016) and direct or indirect owning (financial supporting) of media companies (Vartanova, 2019). Thus, for example, the largest media companies such as Russia-1 TV channel, national dailies *Rossiskaya Gazeta*, news agencies TASS and MIA *Rossija Segodnya* belong to the state agency *Vserossiyskaya gosudarstvennaya televizionnaya i radioveshchatelnaya kompaniya* (All-Russia State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company - VGTRK); Channel One is shared between the government (51%) and private companies (National Media Group and VTB Bank); and NTV is owned by Gazprom-Media, the government-controlled company (Vartanova, 2019).

In addition, control over mass media includes pressure and even crimes against journalists and media outlets. In 2002, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ, 2002) reported that President Putin's administration was either directly involved in or held responsible for a broad range of abuses against independent media outlets. The top executives of many critically-minded media outlets have been reshuffled, including RIA Novosti, Ekho Moskvyy, TV Rain, and Lenta.ru (Horbyk, 2015). The CPJ (2002) also mentioned NTV (previously the only independent television network in Russia with national reach), TV-6 (a private network with national reach) and *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* and *Novaya Gazeta* (opposition newspapers) as victims of state pressure that led to temporary or permanent blocking of the independent media's professional activities, ownership transformations or a significant softening of critical attitudes towards the government.

During the first decade of this century, favourable conditions in the energy market, the elimination of oligarchs' influence and victory in the Second Chechen War allowed Putin and his retinue to put the political system completely under their control (Hajduk and Stępniewski, 2016: p. 40). Reporters criticizing the authorities on either state or regional levels were threatened, attacked and even murdered because of their investigative work; examples include Anna Politkovskaya, Mikhail Afanasyev and

Akhmednabi Akhmednabiyev (Article 19, 2013: p. 3). Article 19 (2013) argues that these cases are emblematic of the way in which the Russian authorities have reshaped the media landscape of contemporary Russia.

Thus, by the beginning of the 2010s, the media system in Russia represented the government-commercial Eurasian model, synthesizing “European” characteristics of commercialization and “Asian” features of authoritarian control of the government (Vartanova, 2013; Pasti and Nordenstreng, 2013). The regime’s tightening grip over the media led some observers to make parallels with the Soviet legacy (Oates, 2007; Vartanova, 2012). Oates (2007: p. 1288), for example, describes the media system in Putin’s Russia as a ‘neo-Soviet model’, arguing that such high levels of propaganda, self-censorship and government control in Russia are possible because they are close to natural, an inheritance from the Soviet past. The prefix ‘neo’ constitutes the new features of the modern media system that are necessary to respond to market forces and countenance physical violence against journalists (Oates, 2007: p. 1296).

Self-censorship and government control do not necessarily mean that there is perfect continuity with Soviet times, however. Becker (2004, 2014) argues that the Soviet legacy has much less impact on the contemporary relations between media and government in Russia and that Oates’s concept of a neo-Soviet media system is thus not accurate. Instead, Becker (2004, 2014) proposes the term ‘neo-authoritarian’ to describe Russia’s media system, meaning that it has more in common with the systems of other non-democratic countries like China or Venezuela than with the Soviet Union. This concept, according to Becker, better explains the power relationships by which the government increases its control over the media only episodically when an issue is critical to the political leadership (Becker, 2014: p. 196). The rest of the time, this neo-authoritarian media system is distinguished by an increased amount of tabloid-style popular entertainment content designed to divert the population (Walker and Orttung, 2014: p. 75; see also Laruelle, 2014).

The neo-authoritarian media system model successfully captures developments regarding state-controlled broadcasters prior to 2012. Since that year, when Putin started his third presidential term after large-scale protests in Moscow ‘For fair elections’, the model has changed and, in my view, merged with Oates’s neo-Soviet media system model. While the political situation required increased control over the media, the content, in contrast to Becker’s neo-authoritarian model, did not consist of de-politicized entertainment: quite the reverse. Indeed, after 2012, state-controlled broadcasters have significantly increased airtime devoted to political and ideological issues (Tolz and Teper, 2018).

At the same time, television remains the dominant and most pervasive medium for distributing news to the vast majority of Russians (Broadcasting

Board of Governors, 2014). In 2014, when the Ukraine crisis was unfolding, around 90% of people in Russia cited television as their main source of information (Levada Center, 2014a), and most (59%) were more likely to trust their source of information (Levada Center, 2016). Although the television audience decreased to 72% by 2019, the state-aligned channels (particularly Channel One, Rossia-1 and NTV, all three channels have a nationwide outreach) remain the most popular news source for Russians with nearly a half of the Russian population regularly watching news programs of those channels on TV or online (Statista, 2019). These channels also enjoy a relatively high level of trust, at around 55%, and play a key role in articulating the official discourse (Levada Center, 2019a; Tolz and Teper, 2018).

Notably, this high level of popularity and trust, along with consumption of highly political and ideological content, is also well captured by the neo-Soviet model of the media system. In the Soviet Union, the news was not meant to inform but to 'lead' the population (Ognyanova, 2010). As Oates (2007) describes it, 'the media sent a clear, unambiguous message about Soviet values, giving the audience a sense of contentment and pride in their society' (pp. 1295–1296). Although the contemporary Russian media landscape is more diverse and offers a wider range of media outlets, Oates (2007: p. 1296) reports that the audience still values the fundamental role of the media as an institution that guides rather than informs and does not question or undermine the nation. Following the Soviet tradition, people use the media to make sense of domestic and foreign events, thus expecting it to determine and signal what is good and what is bad. This could explain why Russians consistently choose Channel One or other state-run television channels as their favourite source of information. It could also explain why people trust that state-run television covers the events in Ukraine truthfully and without bias (Levada Center, 2015a; WCIOM, 2014¹).

2.3. TAKING INFORMATION WARFARE ONLINE: GOVERNMENT'S CONTROL AND SURVEILLANCE TOOLBOX

The internet has turned modern information warfare into a global multimedia forum where rival voices struggle to be heard (Cottle, 2006), making it increasingly difficult to impose hegemonic narratives or framings on a conflict (Darczewska, 2014; Hoskins and O'Loughlin, 2015; Jack, 2017; Kaempf, 2013; Kalinina, 2016; Miskimmon et al., 2014; Oates, 2014; Pomerantsev, 2019; see also Antoniadou et al., 2010; Papacharissi, 2012). However, while the Russian internet continues searching the opportunities to

¹ It is interesting to note that Levada Center is a non-governmental research organization, which has been formed by the professionals previously employed by WCIOM, after WCIOM has been transformed into an open joint-stock company with full state ownership in 2003.

grow as a platform where pluralistic opinions can co-exist and be freely exchanged (Bolin et al., 2016; Wijermars and Lehtisaari, 2019), the Russian government tries to adapt to the modern networked communication environment through a set of new law regulations and control techniques (Van der Vet, 2019). Ognyanova (2010) suggests that this is the established information politics in Russia that has allowed the state administration to extend its traditional manipulation strategies to encompass the internet.

The situation was exacerbated with the Arab Spring (2010–2012) when several authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and North Africa collapsed. Social media may not have caused revolutions, but it did contribute to the growth of protests across the region, as information flowed from Tunisia to other Arab states (Hall, 2019; Wolfsfeld et al., 2013). The internet has been credited with opening new venues for civic debate like blogs and social networks that are significantly different from what is offered by traditional mainstream media (Etling et al., 2014; Kelly et al., 2012). For example, it has been reported that on Twitter any (dis)information from governments, militaries or other official sources is rapidly met with counter-narratives (e.g., Zeitzoff, 2014). In addition, in Russia, digital communication technologies enabled contestation and mobilization of people after allegedly fraudulent parliamentary elections in December 2011 (Oates, 2013), which resulted in the large-scale protests in Moscow, and also in the ‘internet elections’, an absolutely new digital tactic of public’s collective action (Toepfl, 2018).

In reply, the Russian government has tried to block the internet with elaborate control measures. Thus, in 2012 Russia introduced a centralized internet blacklist known as the ‘single register’ and maintained it by the Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media (Roskomnadzor). The list is used for the censorship of individual URLs, domain names and IP addresses and for removing allegedly illegal content or blocking abusive websites without the need for judicial approval. Originally, it was introduced to ban sites calling for drug abuse and drug production, describing methods of suicide and containing child pornography. In 2013, the rules were amended to allow the blocking of websites that contained materials classified as extremist.

The vague definitions of ‘extremist’ activities allowed for flexible interpretations and provided Roskomnadzor with more opportunities to block inconvenient websites. According to Freedom House, these regulations have frequently been abused to censor criticism of the federal government or local administrations (Freedom on the Net, 2016). Thus, for example, on 13 March 2014 (three days before the referendum in Crimea), the Prosecutor General issued an order to block access to three major opposition websites: Grani.ru, Ezhednevny Zhurnal (Ej.ru) and Kasparov.ru. The websites’ owners were not even provided with an explanation as to which content had violated

the law and thus caused the Prosecutor General to issue the blocking order. Their lawsuits have so far brought no positive results (European Audiovisual Observatory, 2015).

At the same time, to legitimize the government's policies aimed at controlling and censoring the internet, the traditional media have generally framed the internet as a threat to the public by employing metaphors of fear (Ognyanova, 2010; Schmidt et al., 2006; Bodrunova and Litvinenko, 2016). Putin also referred to the internet in the context of conspiracy theories, calling for resistance to the CIA's influence and the protection of Russia's online interests (MacAskill, 2014). Schmidt et al. (2006) report that promoting fear and distrust appears to be an intentional strategy to win public support for the government's decisions to censor online content. As a result, over 80% of Russians have negative attitudes about the online availability of politically controversial content (Nisbet, 2015).

Despite the increasing regulation of social and online media and framing cyberspace as an unsafe arena of communication, the internet continues attracting more users and becomes a strong competitor to the traditional mass media in terms of time users spend online and advertising revenue (Vartanova, 2019: p. 29). Vartanova (2019) emphasizes that it has stimulated, though, the digital transformation of the traditional media and, thus, paradoxically, increased the consumption of television products through interactive digital platforms and the growth of non-linear television watching on desktops, laptops and telephone screens (p. 30). Consequently, most of the state-aligned television channels, including Channel One, do not only constitute the first multiplex (mandatory access and free on-air channels available to 98,4% of Russian population) (rtrs.ru, n.d.) but also interact with the audience online. This digital character of contemporary Russian television reconfigures it as a hybrid system, which from one side, provides new opportunities for top-down strategic narrative efforts, and from the other side, due to transnational format of the internet, nurtures critical attention and accusations of propaganda coming from abroad.

The battle to control public opinion online is not limited to the empowerment of the state-run media with the digital features and additional law regulations of cyberspace. A phenomenon known as Russian/Kremlin troll farms has been recognized as a Russian online information warfare tactic. Some scholars identify it as borrowed from Soviet propaganda techniques like reflexive control, 'maskirovka' or deception and adapted to networked online media (Jaitner, 2015; Sienkiewicz, 2016; Suslov, 2016). In practice, public awareness of troll use in political contexts was heightened when the Ukraine crisis broke out and references to state-sponsored deviant behaviours online against political opposition in authoritarian regimes in general and Russia in particular became frequent (Zelenkauskaitė and Niezgodą, 2017).

Sienkiewicz (2016) reports that these government-paid web users populate internet resources and social media with Kremlin-supported messages and harass unfriendly journalists and opponents on a regular basis. It is believed that, in order to confuse the global networked discourse, Russia expends tremendous resources in support of troll farms; just one of the many troll offices in Russia employs roughly 400 people and costs nearly \$5 million a year in salaries alone (Sienkiewicz, 2016: p. 21).

Suslov (2016) notes that the trolls' messages are often merely an exchange of symbolic markers or 'reminders' of hatred (p. 62). This means that, with the help of symbol-laden metaphors and rhetoric of fear ('fascists', 'lybirasts', etc.), trolling commentators appeal to emotion rather than reason. Suslov (2016) suggests that contemporary cyberwars represent the stage on which online polemics concentrate largely on promoting negative mobilization and the humiliation of critical users.

Along with the development of the crisis in Ukraine, state regulation and censorship of the internet in Russia was becoming more intense. In 2014, the Russian government enacted the so-called 'blogger law' (Russian Federation, 2014), which forced owners of open-access websites and web pages (labelled 'bloggers') visited by more than 3000 users a day to register with the public authorities. It also imposed additional responsibility on them to verify the accuracy and reliability of posted information, follow election laws, respect reputations and privacy, refrain from using curse words and obey other conditions (European Audiovisual Observatory, 2015). A website could be registered voluntarily or upon request from Roskomnadzor. The registered organizers of information dissemination were obliged to store visitor data for six months. This included metadata about correspondence but did not require the contents of such communications (Russian Federation, 2014).

In 2016, an updated version of the Russian Federation Doctrine of Information Security came into force, replacing a document approved in 2000 (Russian Federation Doctrine of Information Security, 2000) and adding a number of strategic provisions. One key difference between the two documents is that the 2016 rules introduced the internet as a central concept and called on the government to develop 'a national system of managing the Russian segment of the internet' (Russian Federation Doctrine of Information Security, 2016). The consolidation of management and centralization of information resources were declared to be major priorities for information security.

Another major difference is that, while the 2000 doctrine prioritizes individual interests, the new vision is completely focused on national interests in the field of information (Sharikov, 2016). In addition, while the previous document made a distinction between external and internal threats to the information security of Russia, the updated vision included no such

differentiation. Fridman (2018) argues that this merger of the individual and the national and external and internal threats in the 2016 doctrine emphasizes the causal connection, in the Kremlin's view, between external influences and internal destabilization of the state and provides more favourable conditions for the government to conduct information warfare both inside the country and beyond Russia's borders (p. 146).

In 2016, the Russian government also approved legal amendments known as the 'Yarovaya package' or 'Yarovaya law'. This refers to a set of two federal bills, 374-FZ (Russian Federation, 2016a) and 375-FZ (Russian Federation, 2016b), that strengthen the conditions for the state's struggle against terrorism and extremism. According to the law, communications providers and internet operators are obliged to store metadata about their users' communications activities, to disclose decryption keys upon request by the security services and to use only encryption methods approved by the Russian government. Article 19 (2018) argues that, in practical terms, these amendments create a backdoor for Russia's security agents to access internet users' data, traffic patterns and communications (pp. 52–53).

Thus, in October 2017, the messaging service Telegram was found guilty under the Yarovaya Law of failing to provide decryption keys to the Russian authorities. Pavel Durov, who created the application, has been a constant and vociferous critic of the Russian government. When the Yarovaya package was adopted, Durov proclaimed that the law undermined the right to secrecy of correspondence and that compliance not only contradicted the application's policies but was also technically impossible (BBC News Russkaya sluzhba, 2018). For these reasons, his company refused to cooperate with the authorities. The company was fined 800,000 rubles (approximately 11,000 EUR). Telegram lost an appeal of the administrative charge in March 2018, giving the Russian authorities formal grounds to block Telegram in Russia. Under these circumstances, Telegram officially became an inconvenient actor and, more importantly, a target for pressure.

Finally, on 1 May 2019, President Putin signed the 'sovereign internet law', which went into effect on 1 November 2019 (Russian Federation, 2019). The law significantly enhances the Kremlin's control over the internet. It allows Russia's government to cut off the internet completely or block traffic from outside Russia during an emergency caused by a foreign threat like a cyberattack, as the BBC reported (BBC News, 2019). The law allows the Russian government to tighten control over the country's internet by routing web traffic through state-controlled infrastructure and creating a national system of domain names (CNBC, 2019); in its report, CNBC calls it an 'online Iron Curtain'.

Indeed, in the new global media ecology, Russia's strategic narratives are fragile, as they are constantly challenged by alternative domestic (internet) information sources, international news and other transnational

actors (Oates, 2014). The Russian government, as other non-democratic regimes, is, yet, unable to extensively control the internet primarily due to the challenges of technical execution and the internet's global connectivity feature (Wijermars and Lehtisaari, 2019). Consequently, the internet in Russia continues nurturing a general digital suspicion (Andrejevic, 2013; Kuntsman and Stein, 2011) that tends to increase in the contexts of political crises and wars. However, at the same time, the federal and mainstream television remains influential as a source of information and as an instrument of articulating strategic narratives (Hoskins and Shchelin, 2018).

2.4. UNDERSTANDING RUSSIA'S INVOLVEMENT IN THE UKRAINE CRISIS AND THE SYRIAN WAR

Despite accusations, the Russian government continues to deny any direct involvement in the conflict in Ukraine (Public Radio International, 2019; Welt, 2020). In Syria, by contrast, Russia emphasizes its official position of engagement. Although the legal, officially declared engagement of Russia in these two conflicts is vastly different, both conflicts have been accompanied by remarkable media campaigns in Russia and internationally. A major milestone in the information warfare arose in 2013–2014, during the Ukraine crisis; the Russian government proved to be quite efficient in mobilizing the population, increasing patriotism and boosting Putin's popularity (Levada Center, 2015b, 2019b). When Russia announced its intervention to Syria in 2015, it continued using similar strategies of information warfare based on strategic narratives with references to history and national identity to gain public support for the new military operation.

2.4.1. ARMED CONFLICT IN UKRAINE: A BRIEF SUMMARY

The military conflict in Ukraine followed the Euromaidan protests and incorporation of Crimea into Russia without the Ukrainian authorities' consent. The Russian government, and President Vladimir Putin in particular, appealed to the historical and geopolitical imaginations of Russians related to Crimea and extensively used the Euromaidan protests as an argument to justify the deployment of the unmarked troops 'to protect' Russian-speaking Crimeans and to support the referendum of the peninsula's population (Biersack and O'Lear, 2014). Despite the legal rhetoric² and strong historical claims to Crimea, the referendum fulfilled the criteria of neither legality nor legitimacy breaching Ukraine's domestic, bilateral

² Legal rhetoric was based on the right of the Crimean people to self-determination in the form of secession appealing to Art. 5 of the Russian Constitution which contains a provision for the right of the peoples to self-determination but does not confer to them the right to secede from the Russian Federation.

(Ukraine-Russia) and international legal frameworks (Bebler, 2015; Lamont, 2014; Podolian, 2014; Vidmar, 2015).

The crisis escalated further in April and May 2014, when two Ukrainian regions proclaimed their independence from Kyiv and formed so-called people's republics: the 'Donetsk People's Republic' (DPR) and the 'Luhansk People's Republic' (LPR). A military confrontation between the regions' new 'authorities' and the Ukrainian government was framed differently by the involved parties. The Ukrainian mainstream media characterized separatists in Eastern regions as terrorists backed by the Russian military units' munitions and forces and, consequently, the Ukrainian government's military actions against them as the anti-terrorist operation (ATO) (Katchanovski, 2016). The Russian mainstream media denied any involvement and framed separatists as rebels (in the defensive and sympathetic connotations) and the conflict as a civil war between the Russian-speaking or pro-Russian Ukrainian population and *khunta* "junta" used as a standard term for the Kyiv government and its *karateli* (expeditionary forces, pacifiers or lit. punishers) when referring to the government military forces (Horbyk, 2015; Pettersson and Wallenstein, 2015).

The conflict rapidly intensified and by the end of 2014, rough estimates indicated that more than four thousand people had been killed and approximately half a million had been displaced because of the conflict (SIPRI Yearbook, 2015). The conflict also led to a significant humanitarian crisis in Eastern regions and to the events such as the downing of the MH17 airliner with 298 civilian deaths, while it was flying over the Donbas area on 17 July 2014 (OHCHR, 2019). The military operations by both sides still continue. Internationally, the Ukraine crisis has provoked a conflict between Ukraine and Russia, and the sharpest deterioration in relations between Russia and the West since the early 1980s (Charap and Shapiro, 2015).

2.4.2. SYRIAN CIVIL WAR: A BRIEF SUMMARY

The Syrian civil war grew out of political protests in early 2011. The protests were inspired by successful uprisings during the Arab Spring that toppled presidents in Tunisia and Egypt. Bashar al-Assad's government met the initially peaceful demonstrations with increasing repression and force. The government's military responses, which claimed hundreds of civilian lives, led to increased clashes between opposition groups and state authorities and, ultimately, a full-fledged civil war. The Syrian opposition consisted of secular and Islamist armed groups, including a variety of jihadist groups, such as the competing Al Nusra Front and the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) (Anzalone, 2016). The expansionism of ISIS further contributed to the escalation of the conflict (Dal, 2016). In June 2014, after consolidating its hold over several cities in Iraq and Syria, the group declared the

establishment of a caliphate and changed its name to the Islamic State (Hassan, 2018).

The rise of the ISIS threat created security and political challenges in many countries and motivated the international community to intervene in the civil war. In September 2014, the US-led Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS was formed. While the use of force by the coalition was officially requested and welcomed by the Iraq government, the Syrian government characterised the coalition's operations as a violation of its sovereignty (Gill, 2016: pp. 361–362). The US and its allies, in return, blamed the al-Assad regime for beginning the civil war and increasing the number of civilian casualties. The Coalition supported Syrian rebels identified by the US as a moderate opposition (Casula, 2015).

Russia started its military campaign in Syria in September 2015 in response to a formal request by al-Assad's government for help against anti-government groups. Russia has justified its foray into Syria as an effort to fight global terrorism and defeat ISIS, but Russia's strategic objectives included keeping its long-time ally in power and securing continued access to the Tartus naval base. Meanwhile, Putin defined Russia's goal in Syria as 'stabilising the legitimate power in Syria and creating the conditions for political compromise' (Interfax, 2015). Its military and diplomatic intervention ensured Russia's important role in conflict resolution processes (Casula, 2015). Russia has used media coverage to showcase its re-emergence as a global superpower (Frolovskiy, 2019).

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: STRATEGIC NARRATIVE

In everyday life, 'human beings think, perceive and make moral choices according to narrative structures' (Sarbin, 1986: p. 8). At the most basic level, narratives bring together actors, actions, goals, reasons and references upon which humans symbolically make sense of the world (Boje, 1991: p. 106; see also Burke, 1969). Harold Rosen (1986) argues that narratives make it possible to infuse coherence into chaotic flows of information by guiding the processes of reasoning and understanding. **Narrative is thus a mode of attributing meanings to events**, and collective narratives establish shared meanings of events (Boyce, 1995; Taylor et al., 2002). A shared understanding of the world helps individuals interpret their actions and the actions of others in terms of currently accepted responsibilities, values, moral norms and social contexts. Collective narratives are especially important when events are complex, ambiguous and difficult to interpret using solely logical and factual methods (Soulier and Caussanel, 2002), as occurs in a political crisis or a war.

Freedman (2006), who has developed much research into strategic narratives, argues that **narratives become strategic when there is an intention to influence perceptions**. For that, strategic narratives make use of ideas and feelings that are already current in society (p. 22). Therefore, strategic narratives are difficult to recognize as an attempt of persuasion but are more tapping into 'ideas that are common sense in a particular culture' (Colley, 2019: p. 47) or 'a part of the natural and generally benign order of things' (Freedman, 2013: p. 615). In this understanding, the concept of strategic narratives overlaps with the concept of discourse.

Discourse is a set of meanings and practices constructed according to the rules about what is accepted in society as norms, knowledge and values (Foucault, 1972). Discourse can be described as the currently existing state of affairs or a fixed frame of references that create an understanding of the roles of actors and their relationships. What the concept of discourse *cannot* explain, however, is the causal transformation that takes actors or their relationships from one status quo to another, as strategic narratives do (Miskimmon et al., 2013: p. 7). Thus, discourse impacts the content of strategic narratives but cannot replace them, as it lacks the necessary causal and temporal features to do so. Hence, conceptually, **a strategic narrative represents a communicative tool that political elites intentionally deploy in their attempts to construct a shared meaning of the origins, current state and future outcomes of political processes so as to influence the behaviour of domestic and international actors** (Miskimmon and O'Loughlin, 2017).

Although strategic narratives usually originate from political elites, they are advanced and disseminated by mass media outlets (Hinck et al., 2019: p. 5). Mainstream media, therefore, comes to the fore as an actor that filters out and voices only particular narratives or as a conduit that transfers the narratives from a source to the audience (Arsenault et al., 2017: p. 204 cited in Hinck et al., 2019: p. 5). Political (and other) elites use strategic narratives in mass media, to achieve a variety of communicative goals, such as agenda setting, legitimization, diverting attention, securing acquiescence, enhancing popularity, mobilization and facilitation of policymaking (Barry and Elmes, 1997; Freedman, 2006: pp. 23–24; Mattern Bially, 2005: pp. 13, 107; Miskimmon et al., 2012, 2013: p. 8). The powerful strategic narratives around the events of 9/11 designed by the Bush administration are a striking example of legitimization: they justified the invasion of Iraq as a patriotic duty, labelled dissenting voices ‘anti-American’ and stigmatized certain migrant communities as perpetual suspects (Andrews, 2007). In the context of the Yugoslav wars, narratives created by political and religious elites provided an important incentive for nationalists’ mobilization and subsequent intense violence (Baker, 2006; Smith, 1997; Vujačić and Gagnon, 2007).

Studying strategic narratives in the news, however, means exploring the mechanisms employed by the news media or individual journalists to frame events in a certain way to facilitate the mobilization and support of the public. The concepts of **framing** and **strategic narratives** share the same function of attributing meaning. In media studies, Gamson and Modigliani (1989) understand *frames* as ‘interpretative packages’ that attach meanings to issues or events. Moreover, Goffman (1974) has noted that the meaning of a frame has implicit cultural roots. This dependence on the cultural contexts of a society establishes another similarity between framing and strategic narrative concepts. In mass communication research, it has been described as ‘cultural resonance’ (Gamson and Modigliani, 1987) and ‘cultural congruence’ (Entman, 2009). The more frames employ culturally resonant references, the more potential they have in terms of cognition, emotional appeal and, as a result, influence (Entman, 2009).

However, *frames*, same as *discourse*, do not typically introduce an explanation of causal and temporal transformation; they do not explain the reasons for and outcomes of an event (Miskimmon et al., 2013). Frames give prominence to certain facets of an event or issue to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation or solution (Bougana and Segev, 2017; Entman, 2009, Norris et al., 2003; Tankard, 2001). Therefore, strategic narratives often represent a series of particular framings. Miskimmon et al. (2013) argue that understanding strategic narratives enables the comprehension of why and how framing actually works. In other words, a strategic narrative puts the story first, connecting specifically framed actors, circumstances, reasons and future outcomes with cause-and-effect relations.

Thus, a strategic narrative is defined in this dissertation **as a set of media frames undertaken to reinforce, subvert, undermine, overwhelm or replace a pre-existing discourse on a subject significant to both the audience and the ‘speaker’ that is often a political elite** (Price, 2014). This thesis draws on the strategic narrative framework based on two theoretical arguments. First, the concept allows for piecing together and analysing the dynamic flows of information during political and military conflicts. Second, the concept of strategic narrative can provide a more nuanced understanding of how media narratives may shape opinions and create support for decisions related to political and military conflicts.

This chapter examines the nature of strategic narratives and what makes them different from soft power and propaganda (section 3.1). It also addresses previous research dealing specifically with how and why strategic narratives are built around conflicts and wars (section 3.2). The chapter develops further by describing how strategic relatives are advanced through such a journalistic genre as television news (section 3.3). Then the power of visuals in strategic narratives is discussed (section 3.4). Finally, the chapter specifies the narratives that are promoted through the Russian television news with regard to the Ukraine crisis and the war in Syria (section 3.5).

3.1. DEFINING A STRATEGIC NARRATIVE CONCEPT BY DISTINGUISHING IT FROM THE CONCEPTS OF SOFT POWER AND PROPAGANDA

While the term ‘strategic narrative’ is relatively new, there is a long history of scholars addressing the importance of communication as a means of shaping others’ perceptions and sentiments. Closely related terms include **soft power** and **propaganda**. Below, I contribute to the understanding of the differences and similarities between these concepts.

3.1.1. SOFT POWER

The concept of soft power is frequently used in international affairs to explain the power balance between countries achieved through other means rather than the use of military or economic might. Joseph Nye, who introduced the concept, calls it ‘the ability to attract’ (2004: p. 6) or, in terms of resources, a combination of assets that a country uses to produce such attraction (2008: p. 95). These assets include a country’s culture, political values and foreign policy. When a country succeeds in presenting its policies and political values so that they appear attractive and legitimate to others, that country’s soft power is enhanced, which gives it a better chance to influence others and achieve its political goals in international relations

without using the threat of force or coercive economic measures (Rothman, 2011: p. 50).

Policies and political values become attractive and legitimate only when they are aligned with the cultural, historical and political contexts in which they are presented; thus, soft power assets become meaningful only when they are contextualized within the shared understandings of social relations (Feklyunina, 2016). Soft power constitutes a relational phenomenon that depends on the context. Roselle et al. (2014) apply this approach to soft power within the conceptual category of strategic narratives, arguing that a strategic narrative is soft power but provides a better way to examine 'what means and methods of persuasion and influence are likely to work under what conditions' (p. 71). Thus, instead of taking a 'resource' or an 'asset' as an analytical category, **I use the concept of strategic narrative to explore *how* and *what* resources have been used to advance a specific interpretation of events through mass media (television) and align it with the expectations and values of the intended audience(s).**

Some scholars believe that authoritarian countries like Russia often use information and rhetoric as a means of wielding soft power (Borchers, 2011; Jowett and O'Donnell, 2012; Yablokov, 2015). Nye's famous expression about 'whose story wins' (2014: p. 21) is used to describe international conflicts in the information age, in which the successful side is the country that presents the most convincing and legitimate interpretation of events (Pomerantsev, 2015; Szostek, 2014). Thus, 'harder' soft power assets include manipulation of information and propaganda (Rothman, 2011: p. 50).

3.1.2. PROPAGANDA

The concept of *propaganda* is typically understood in communication studies as a persuasive instrument to move audiences with a pre-established intent to bolster the interest and values of a sender (Arthos, 2013). In the Soviet tradition, as discussed above, propaganda carried a positive connotation of political education. Despite criticism, this approach still dominates the political thinking of contemporary Russian elites. For instance, Dmitry Tulchinskly, the Berlin bureau chief of the Russian news agency Rossiya Segodnya, has defined propaganda as 'the tendentious presentation of facts... It does not mean lying' (Troianovski, 2014, cited in Boyte, 2017).

In the Western understanding, however, propaganda is usually regarded as equivalent to manipulation, fallacy, concealment, emotional exploitation or behavioural modification (Jowett and O'Donnell, 2012; Sproule, 1994; Taithe and Thorton, 2000). Alex P. Schmid (2014) argues that democratic governments thus avoid using the term 'propaganda' for their information-based influence operations aimed at affecting the attitudes and

behaviours of specific audiences. Instead, they prefer terms like ‘public affairs’, ‘public diplomacy’, ‘psychological operations’ and ‘strategic communications’³ (Schmid, 2014, p. 1).

The concept of strategic narratives, however, differs from propaganda. Dimitriu and De Graaf (2016) hold that strategic narratives are a more nuanced instrument of persuasion as it relates to the national culture of norms and attitudes regarding war and peace. As Corman (2011) has emphasized, ‘[n]arratives are powerful resources for influencing target audiences... as they offer an alternative form of rationality deeply rooted in culture, which can be used to interpret and frame local events and to strategically encourage particular kinds of personal action’ (p. 42). From this perspective, strategic narrative is a construct defined by both the subject of influence and the context.

Miskimmon et al. (2013) emphasize that narratives may be created strategically, but not any narrative can be produced at any time. Propaganda, by contrast, is normally determined by the intention of its source. It represents a strictly top-down flow of deliberately devised messages from the source to masses of people with the purpose of generating actions that benefit the source (Parry-Giles, 2002: p. xvii). A distinguishing characteristic of strategic narratives is their ‘resonating’ with target audiences, as they are initially designed as **culturally attuned constructions** (Colley, 2019: p. 47; see also Hinck et al., 2018; Riessman, 2008). However, the existing literature does not contribute much in the understanding of how strategic narratives are attuned when they are promoted for the international audience. This dissertation made an attempt to fill this gap by exploring how Russia’s RT tailored the strategic narratives related to the Ukraine crisis for the international public.

3.2. CONFLICTS AND STRATEGIC NARRATIVES

The power of actors in contemporary conflicts depends to a great extent on public support, both at home and within the area of operations. De Graaf et al. (2015: p. 5) state that ‘success in war is nearly always a matter of convincing one or more audiences of a particular understanding of reality’. Therefore, perhaps, it was no coincidence that scholars have started to talk about a ‘narrative turn’ in international relations and media studies (see Levinger and Roselle, 2017: p. 94 and De Fina and Georgakopoulou, 2019: pp. 21–27) and pay considerable attention to strategic narratives as an

³ Although the terms ‘strategic narrative’ and ‘strategic communication’ might sound confusingly similar, they are different in their definition. Strategic communication represents the whole spectrum of various communication activities purposefully designed to engage the public in a conversation and help an entity survive and achieve sustained success. An entity includes all kinds of organizations (e.g., corporations, governments, or nonprofits, social movements and known individuals in the public sphere) (Zerfass et al., 2018). Thus, a strategic narrative might be one of the instruments in strategic communication.

instrument of persuasion of domestic and international audiences (Freedman, 2015; Goddard and Krebs, 2015; Krebs, 2015; Miskimmon et al., 2017; Senn, 2017; Snyder, 2015), especially during the contemporary wars and conflicts (Colley, 2019; de Franco, 2012; Hutchings and Szostek, 2015; Lucas and Pomeranzen, 2016; Nissen, 2013; Simpson, 2012) and when justifying the military engagement abroad (Berinski, 2007; de Graaf et al., 2015; Dimitriu and de Graaf, 2016; Ringsmose and Børgesen, 2011).

This research is based on the premise that strategic narratives are powerful instruments used to support the legitimacy and credibility of a conflict. I use a definition of a conflict in a political sense: 'a state of hostility between groups of people, usually belonging to different races, religions or nation states' (Baker, 2006: p. 1). Normally, legitimacy during conflicts is constructed at three levels of strategic narratives: issue narratives, identity narratives and international system narratives (Miskimmon and O'Loughlin, 2017; Roselle et al., 2014).

First, in a time of conflict, ongoing events often require a specific response or a policy from political actors. In this case, 'issue narratives' (also called 'policy narratives') are constructed and advanced around the issues. Issue narratives are deployed to place the government's decisions in a context that explains who the important actors are, what the conflict or issue is and how a particular course of actions will resolve the underlying issue (Roselle et al., 2014: p. 76; see also Miskimmon and O'Loughlin, 2017; Vlahos, 2009).

Second, the narrative of identity (national narrative) is crucial when a conflict relates to international affairs and thereby reshapes attitudes to 'Others' involved in the conflict. Identity narratives encompass people's perceptions about themselves as a unique collective consciousness, distinguished by territory, common values and culture (Gutiérrez, 2001). These narratives make meaning out of a nation's history in accordance with the nation's goals and perceptions of its own uniqueness (Miskimmon and O'Loughlin, 2017; Miskimmon et al., 2013). The perceptions of who we are and what makes us unique are constructed by defining who the 'Others' are and the ways in which we resemble or differ from them (Siddi, 2018). Wars and conflicts reveal existing beliefs related to identity affiliations, which are usually packed with nationalistic feelings like pride and patriotism and aimed to distinguish 'us' from 'them' (Cottle, 2006: p. 77) and create the moral justifications for violence against them (De Graaf et al., 2015; Dimitriu and de Graaf, 2016; Freedman, 2006; Ringsmose and Børgesen, 2011; Roselle, 2010; Vujačić and Gagnon, 2007).

Third, international system narratives are used by political actors to explain the structure of the world beyond their states' borders and to affect the behaviour of other international actors (Levinger and Roselle, 2017; Miskimmon and O'Loughlin, 2017; Miskimmon et al., 2013). This is

particularly true in periods of transition in the international system when hegemonic powers are facing changes in the status quo (Antoniades et al., 2010). The end of the Cold War, for example, brought about profound changes in international relations. Since then, Russia has been striving to restore its image as a global superpower and constructing its strategic narratives accordingly. Levinger and Roselle (2017) argue that beginning with his first presidential term in 2000, Putin has consistently attempted to counteract the Western unipolar system narrative that depicts the US as the only remaining global superpower with the narrative of a 'polycentric world' in which Russia remains a great power. Levinger and Roselle (2017: p. 95) conclude that the core of Russia's strategic narrative related to international relations is its self-image as a 'centre of influence in today's world'.

All three levels of strategic narratives – issue, identity and international system – are interconnected. Roselle et al. (2014: p. 77) hold that strategic narratives promoted at one level impact narratives at other levels and, in combination, constrain policy choices and behaviour. Often, the same narratives configure perceptions of events, belonging and identity and shape the relationships between individuals and nations. From this perspective, it is appropriate to mention that efforts aimed at persuasion are not limited to political leaders' statements; public approval of military actions is usually earned through mass channels of information. The media are thus crucial in the construction or denial of legitimacy during crises or conflicts.

3.3. STRATEGIC NARRATIVES IN NEWS

Ideally, journalistic practices are defined by the established norms of objectivity and professional ethics. However, the authoritarian regimes create an environment where media outlets are tightly controlled and journalists' reporting is constrained with the government's strategic narrative framework. Russia, as it is discussed above, represents this kind of political regime. Nevertheless, to see journalists as nothing but the government's instruments for advancing the strategic narratives would mean to oversimplify the situation and omit the human personality and own choices of journalists and editors.

The scholars point that during national crises or military confrontations, journalists often choose to act according to their national, ethnic, or civil identity even if it comes at the expense of their professional values (Bennett and Paletz, 1994; Hallin, 1986; Liebes, 1997; Liebes and Kampf, 2009; Wolfsfeld et al., 2008; Zandberg and Neiger, 2005; Zelizer and Allan, 2002). This phenomenon, termed 'patriotic journalism', is well-documented all over the world and does not depend on political regimes (Ginosar and Cohen, 2019; Ginosar and Konovalov, 2015). Although there is

no one commonly accepted definition of patriotic journalism, it is often described as the 'loyalty of a journalist, or a journalistic institution, to its nation, country, or ethnic group' explicitly expressed during military conflicts or terror attacks (Ginosar, 2015:p. 290).

Liebes (1992) defines patriotic journalism as coverage of 'our war' as opposed to coverage of "their war" when a journalist is not emotionally, culturally or ethnically attached to the conflict parties and tends to cover the conflict events and involved actors neutrally and objectively. Wolfsfeld et al. (2008) distinguish 'victims mode' and 'defensive mode' of patriotic journalism. The victims mode prevails when journalists belong to the suffering or abused party and their reports aim to mobilize the public against an enemy. The most salient features of the victims mode are emotional intensity, personalization of victims and cultural contextualization based on journalistic techniques that employ ethnic solidarity and demonization of the enemy (Wolfsfeld et al., 2008: p. 404). The defensive mode is observed when it is essential to support the deployment of a state's military forces abroad and to justify civilian losses on the enemy's side. The distinctive features of the defensive mode are extensive use of technical or military terminology and an analytical approach to the ongoing events with the focus on numbers and statistics instead of personal stories, and graphics - especially maps to reinforce the sense of distance. Both the victims and defensive modes, Wolfsfeld et al. (2008) believe, are neither consciously formulated nor intentionally used by journalists.

There are two preconditions that stimulate patriotic journalism as a model of behaviour among reporters and editors. First, this is a public consensus about a particular issue or a historical event, which is not supposed to be disputed or negotiated (Hallin, 1986), for example, the public consensus in Russia about World War II memories. Second, this is a dominant strategic narrative which the government advances without offering an alternative or opposite framing of the events (Ginosar and Cohen, 2019: p. 7). Ginosar and Cohen (2019) argue that when the majority of the population agrees with the government's framing of the events, or when the government purposefully utilizes the commonly accepted public views, social norms or historical memories, the public consensus merges the government's strategic narrative. Indeed, in non-democratic political systems there tend to be more mechanisms to exploit public consensus and orchestrate the content of state-run news outlets. At the same time, the phenomenon of patriotic journalism contributes to a better understanding of why journalists (are willing to) adjust or modify their professional routines in accordance with their ideological position during the national crises or wars.

3.4. THE ROLE OF VISUALS IN MEDIATED STRATEGIC NARRATIVES

Contrary to rational choice theory, which suggests informed and logical deliberation, the impact of visuals is based on the peculiarities of the human brain. The location of the visual cortex in the brain means that information from the visual stimulus is processed faster and more efficiently than data from the senses of hearing, touch, smell or taste (Zimmerman, 1989). Compared with words or text, images have a much longer history in evolutionary processes (Parker, 2003) and allow for faster inferences of relevant information (Newell, 1990). It has been argued that the internal mental processes of cognition begin with the visual appearance of an external stimulus and result in a behavioural response (Hopfinger and Mangun, 2001). Therefore, scholars in the biological sciences assert that humans use their visual experience as the most prevalent method of learning without even realizing it (Barry, 2005; Damasio, 1999).

Despite the importance of visuals in human sense-making processes, the role of an image and in particular visual representations of distant conflicts has only received thorough attention in media and communication studies in the beginning of this century. Parry (2010b) argues that the change in academic attitudes has been influenced by what W.J.T. Mitchell (1994) calls the 'pictorial turn' or 'visual turn' in the humanities and social sciences (cited in Parry, 2010b). The turn reflects the escalation of interest of scholars from varied disciplines to the apparently powerful roles of mediated visual imagery, employing conceptual tools such as 'mediatisation' and 'performativity' (Parry, 2010b). A burst of scholarship on how images are used in information warfare around the conflicts occurred after 9/11 (Eder and Klonk, 2017; Hoskins and O'Loughlin, 2010; Kellner, 2006; Kennedy, 2012; Kotilainen, 2011; Mirzoeff, 2005; Mitchell, 2011; O'Loughlin, 2011; Roger, 2013; Zelizer, 2010).

Later, Roger (2013: p. 46) introduced the concept of 'image warfare' to argue that the media constitute 'a distinct theatre of war – alongside land, sea and air – with images as key weapons (equivalent to bullets, bombs, missiles and mines) used to gain a specific strategic advantage over the enemy'. He refers to how Al-Qaeda has been exceptionally successful in deploying image munitions against the US and UK, which have in turn tried to compete in this war with counter-image munitions. Like munitions in traditional warfare, visuals may be strategically constructed, manipulated or carefully selected to convey an impression that communicates about a distant conflict. It has been argued that images do not aim to accurately depict news stories but to establish legibility and shape the perceptions of reality (Mirzoeff, 2011; Roger, 2013).

Images, however, do not speak on their own. Being biologically designed as a shortcut to human cognition, they are not able to communicate

and explain the complexities of social and political logic. Images gain significance through the way actors use and contextualize them. Miskimmon et al. (2013) emphasize that the perceived level of influence of images is based more on how they appear in a specific context than on their content. Edwards and Winkler (1997: p. 289) explain that, if images are to move the public, they need to 'reflect not only beliefs, attitudes, and values of their creators, but those of the society at large'. It is here that images empower strategic narratives.

Sontag (1977) was among the first to note that an image per se does not have social power, making clear that 'a photograph that brings news of some unsuspected zone of misery cannot make a dent in public opinion unless there is an appropriate context of feeling and attitude' (p. 17). She adds that 'photographs cannot create a moral position, but they can reinforce one – and can help build a nascent one' (p. 17). This view does not, however, deny the inherent symbolic power of visuals. On the contrary, visibility is recognized as having an influence that makes images neither subordinate to discourse nor mere illustrations or representations of reality (Schlag et al., 2015). Therefore, the discursive embeddedness of images directs our attention to the relations between visibility and strategic narratives as between two components that, working together, can amplify the effectiveness of each. As Miskimmon et al. (2013: p. 22) argue, in order to increase the effect of the strategic narratives, political actors need to learn 'how to visualize narrative and fit visuals of ongoing events into long-term strategic narratives'.

The theorization of the image in strategic narratives draws upon O'Loughlin's earlier work (2011) and shifts the focus from the content of images to what that content *re-presents*; i.e., how images are seen and interpreted (Miskimmon et al., 2013: p. 125). In these terms, an image is both a medium and a mode of experience, communication and knowledge, making 'things' visible. Therefore, in this dissertation, the focus is not only on the content of images but also – and even primarily – on *how* the events have been re-presented, visualized, embedded into the context and interpretative framework of the strategic narrative. Particular attention is paid to the combination of 'the language and imagery through which meanings are produced and disseminated in societies' (Hutchison, 2014: p. 4; see also Bleiker, 2001).

How can images communicate narratives? More specifically, why do they have the power to amplify strategic narratives? That images capture and appeal to emotions or even provoke an affective response is not a new topic in academic literature (Aday et. al., 2005; Graber, 1987, 1990; Perlmutter, 2004; Pfau et. al., 2006; Schlag, 2018). The concept of strategic narratives, however, explains why some images move us while others do not evoke any feelings. The images that connect a strategic message with our mindset and,

most importantly, with what we imagine as our better selves, normally evoke powerful emotional replies (Kotilainen, 2011).

Images can act as both a representation and a driver of emotions (Schlag, 2018: p. 211). On the one hand, images make moments of distress and joy visible to others; on the other, they direct our attention to specific events or issues and move us emotionally. Moreover, images represent the feelings of individuals and symbolize the emotions of communities. Thus, emotions are not (only) personal but (also) collective (Mercer, 2014). We can all certainly recall images that evoke personal feelings of love and hate and collective emotions of fear and shame (Schlag, 2018). This is because emotions have a history, too. How and 'why we feel the way we do' is a 'social and cultural process through which emotions are shaped in the first place' (Bleiker and Hutchison, 2018: p. 210; see also Ahmed, 2014). As collective phenomena, emotions are political in the sense that they function as evaluative judgments and social bonds between community members (see Fattah and Fierke, 2009: p. 70 and Nussbaum, 1996: p. 35). Emotions are thus embedded in strategic narratives with the same aim of constructing a shared *feeling* about events to help shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors (Miskimmon et al., 2013: p. 19).

Understanding emotions on either an individual or a collective level as already mediated through representations means understanding strategic narratives. As Bleiker and Hutchinson (2014: p. 506) explicitly note, 'all one can understand is the manner in which emotions are expressed and communicated'. That includes language as much as images. Given this argument, it is remarkable that scholarship has not yet conducted a systematic and thorough investigation of the television news, where visual presentations of events always accompany spoken text. Most often, the comparatively small volume of academic studies of the television news is explained by the methodological obstacles confronting a large-scale analysis. The details of the methodological challenges and the analysis model adopted in this dissertation are outlined in the fourth chapter (Methodology), specifically in the part that considers strategic narrative analysis in television news.

3.5. RUSSIAN MASTER NARRATIVES: HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL IMAGINATION

To be effective, narratives do not have to be based on evidence or factual analysis. The power of narratives is measured by the extent to which they resonate with the intended audience's core social and cultural values, appeal to emotions and, at the same time, advocate a persuasive cause-and-effect description (Freedman, 2006: p. 23; see also Riessman, 2008). This dissertation analyzes the strategic narratives advanced in the news of

Russia's state-run television channels and thus answers the call of Miskimmon et al. (2013, 2017) to provide insights into how particular events come to possess narrativity and emotional value for audiences.

However, before starting to explore strategic narratives in the news, it is important to outline Russia's master narratives, which constitute that specific context of contemporary Russian society. McLean et al. (2020: p. 117) define master narratives as templates through which individuals make sense of the sequence of events or interpret the meaning of events connecting their own experiences with the collective experience and culture. Master narratives can be recognized since they are known by the majority of people within a particular culture and have a moral component which informs why certain groups are marginalized within society (McLean and Syed 2015). In most cases, people use master narratives unconsciously and uncritically to comprehend events (Colley, 2019).

Consequently, those strategic narratives that are closely linked to master narratives appear to be naturally embedded into individuals' worldviews and, therefore, better communicate necessary strategic meanings about complicated phenomena or events. World War II, for example, as a master narrative, outlines an expected trajectory of the conflict that explains why the Russian government should fight back to repel the villain and what would happen if the government failed to do so. In the literature, this connection between master and strategic narratives is defined as coherence and fidelity (Fisher, 1989). While coherence is understood as the consistency of events in a narrative, fidelity is the force that connects the narrative with the audience's pre-existing knowledge, experiences, myths and beliefs (Fisher, 1989).

Thus, the current discourse climate is just as important as prior narratives, since both factors contribute to constructing the framework within which the audience interprets and understands the ongoing events. Below I outline three master narratives since they are most often referred to in the studied news on the crisis in Ukraine and the war in Syria. They are based, on the one hand, on the hostility of Western states and, on the other, on the historical inheritance of Russia as a superpower and victor over fascism in World War II (Cottiero et al., 2015; Hansen, 2015).

3.5.1. RUSSIA VERSUS THE WEST

This narrative has not emerged spontaneously, nor is it new. As discussed above, the anti-Western narrative was already a salient feature of Russian political and media discourse long before the Ukraine crisis broke out and continued to be prominent during the war in Syria (Averre, 2019; Malinova, 2014; Smyth and Soboleva, 2014; Yablokov, 2014; Zhurzhenko, 2015). Szostek (2017) argues that Russia's anti-Western strategic narrative was intensified prior to Vladimir Putin's re-election as a president, when large

public protests erupted over electoral fraud in December 2011 (p. 577). The protests and the performance of anti-Putin punk rockers Pussy Riot were interpreted by Putin and his supporters (at least in public) as a Western-backed plot (Szostek, 2017: p. 577).

Despite similarities with the Cold War discourse, this master narrative has a less solid ideological base and appeals to a wide range of people with anti-Western, antiliberal and anti-globalist views (Waszczykowski, 2015). Although Szostek (2017) distinguishes anti-Western/American and anti-European sentiments in Russia's strategic narratives, both are heavily based on binary oppositions and a well-rooted set of stereotypes, according to which Russia is spiritual, moral and loyal to traditional values, while the West is immoral and acts only to serve its vested interests (Malinova, 2014); and Europe is 'false' and has lost its moral values (Neumann, 1996, cited in Szostek, 2017: p. 578). During the Russian mission in Syria, this binary opposition was promoted especially heavily. The master narrative opposing Western liberalism co-exist with a positive Russian self-conception as a country that has achieved effective statehood, attained military superiority and regained its legitimate place in international society as a great power (Szostek, 2017: p. 585).

This master narrative is flexible in the sense that it often combines ideologically conflicting discourses. Thus, it encompasses both Russia's Orthodox Christian values and its communist legacies. Pomerantsev and Weiss (2014) refer to this as a 'fluid approach to ideology', which successfully combines leftist groups' messages, such as fighting American hegemony and the stereotypical Western lifestyle in general, and right-wing nationalists' praise of anti-EU policies, intolerance of homosexuality and opposition to Islamic movements. In this narrative, Ukraine, after declaring its aspiration to become a member of the EU, became associated with the Western worldview and emerged as a traitor to the values shared by Russians.

3.5.2. RUSSIA AS A VICTOR OVER FASCISM IN WORLD WAR II

This master narrative is based on the victory in World War II, which is seen as the most 'sacred achievement' in Russia's history. Most importantly, due to almost 75 years of cultivating the memory and cult of World War II, the Russian people place that victory and their personal and collective experiences related to the war at the centre of their national identity. World War II memories can be invoked by a single phrase or image without actually telling the story that comprises the event. Such a phrase or image serves as a signifier that invokes not only a particular episode of World War II but also the stereotypes, values and, most importantly, emotions associated with this war.

This master narrative has been heavily employed to discursively construct the Ukraine crisis in Russian media (Edele, 2017; Siddi, 2017;

Spiessens, 2019). Playing up the ‘fascist’ card has proved to be an excellent instrument to bolster an existential threat frame that resonates extremely well in the post-Soviet space (Cottiero et al., 2015; Edele, 2017; Gaufman, 2015; Kuzio, 2015; Spiessens, 2019). The Pro-Kremlin media consistently made emotive references to Banderovtsy (followers of the war-time Ukrainian Nazi collaborator Stepan Bandera) and accused the new Ukrainian government of tolerating and even containing Nazi extremists (Hutchings and Szostek, 2015).

This master narrative has effectively whitewashed Soviet complicity and Stalin’s repressive regime, drawing only on sacrifice, unity, patriotism and unwavering loyalty to the state (Gzirian, 2015). Moreover, the narrative features Ukraine as a part of Russia’s glorious history and justifies Russia’s approach to an independent Ukraine by its being in the sphere of Russia’s geopolitical interests (Plokhyy, 2000). Crimea, according to this master narrative, belongs to Russia as a ‘sacred place’ on the Russian cultural map, along with the ‘hero city’ of Sevastopol, which served as a place of pilgrimage in Soviet times thanks to the heroism of its defenders in World War II. Therefore, the annexation of Crimea did not meet resistance in Russia; on the contrary, it was supported by 88% of Russians in 2014 and still supported by 86% in 2019, even though it was followed by financial costs and political crises in Russia’s international relations (Levada Center, 2019c).

3.5.3. RUSSIA AS A LEADER OF SLAVIC NATIONS

The Soviet regime employed the metaphor of fraternity – ‘all nations are brothers’ – to inculcate a shared patriotism that it hoped would supplant existing and disparate national identities (Kuzio, 2015). This brotherhood narrative, however, later developed into what Lakoff (1996) describes as a ‘strict family’ model, a construction that supposes an asymmetrical status of ‘brothers’. A’Beckett (2012) revealed in her study of Russia’s most widely read newspapers that the media characterized Russia as a caring and mindful ‘big brother’, with Ukraine among its ‘little brothers’. This multilevel construction of the ‘family’ included a niche for the so-called ‘underdeveloped brothers in intelligence’, who were the Central Asian republics of the former Soviet Union. Thus, the narrative asserting that ‘all nations are brothers’ assumed the patronage of the ‘big brother’ and the compliance of the little and underdeveloped ‘brothers’.

In addition to the bonds created during the Soviet regime, Ukraine also occupies a special place in the *Russkiy Mir* (Russian World) concept, which has re-emerged in political discourse following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The concept was employed by the Russian government to overcome social and national disintegration. Laruelle (2015) argues that this concept is a powerful instrument employed by the Russian government, first, to justify Russia’s right to oversee – and sometimes intervene in – the

development of its neighbouring countries. Second, the concept facilitates reconnection between the global Russian diasporas who identify with Russian culture, language, historical memory and the Orthodox religion (Feklyunina, 2016; Zhurzhenko, 2015). Third, the concept embodies the brotherhood of the Slavic nations - Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. In this sense, the concept transcends both the contemporary and Soviet-era ideological constructions by identifying Russia as central to the ancient civilizations connected by sacred bonds between the Slavic nations that may be traced back to Prince Vladimir's baptism of Kyiv in 988 (Zhurzhenko, 2015).

In view of the above, it would be misguided to suggest that, prior to the Ukraine crisis, the Russian media ascribed to Ukrainians qualities that emphasized independence or success in the state-building aspirations. However, after the Euromaidan, the Ukrainians' image in the Russian media altered dramatically. In place of the narrative depicting a dependent 'little brother', the World War II-fuelled master narrative constructed an image of the Ukrainians as a dehumanized Other.

Thus, anti-Western sentiments and historical memory, including Russia's status as a leader of all Slavic nations, are important elements in the building of the dominant strategic narratives of Russian society in relation to the Ukraine crisis and the Syrian war. Kalinina (2016) emphasizes that by pulling the strings of the 'Russian historical and cultural identity' 'anti-West xenophobia' and 'Russian patriotism', the Russian government has tailored the strategic narratives to both the domestic audience and the international public.

4. METHODOLOGY

My core research goal was to explore how television news advanced strategic narratives that legitimized violence, human costs and engagement in the conflicts. This goal was posited with the awareness that there was no ready-made model of analysis that incorporated both the strategic narrative concept and the peculiarities of television news. Moreover, I aimed to examine the strategic narratives in their dynamics when the context was constantly changing.

To achieve the goal, the dissertation is designed as three sub-studies that explore how strategic narratives are modified (1) when the relationship between the countries has significantly changed, (2) when they are aimed at different audiences (domestic and international) and (3) when they relate to two different conflicts: the Ukraine crisis and Syria's civil war. Throughout all the sub-studies my main focus was on the **visuals** used in the news of Channel One and RT to advance the strategic narratives. As noted in the introduction to this thesis, my research question was as follows:

How does Russian television news visually advance the strategic narratives related to the Ukrainian crisis and the civil war in Syria?

This chapter is designed to discuss the existing methods for the analysis of the television news (section 4.1), the model of the data analysis employed in this dissertation (section 4.2), the sources of the data (section 4.3) and what constitutes the data (section 4.4). Finally, the chapter outlines the ethical considerations of this research (section 4.5).

4.1. ANALYSING TELEVISION NEWS

Television news displays communicative complexity. News reports usually contain at least two modes of communication: texts that can be written (like signs or messages) or reproduced as an audio track (dialogues, journalists' comments) and visuals that can be still photographs but are generally moving pictures. In the analysis, it is also important to consider the political economy of the media ownership and the political, social and cultural context. Jones (2016) argues that without a dedicated methodology, there is always a risk that a researcher will overlook one of the threads and thus miss potentially important characteristics in a multi-layered meaning system like television news.

Graber (2001, 2004) has offered a model for analysing television news that considers at least four components: (1) the general political environment

at the time of the broadcast; (2) the anchor's introduction and any editorializing by reporters; (3) audio-visual messages communicated by a mix of words, pictures and sounds; and (4) the interaction between the narrative elements within a single report or among reports in the same newscast. Even though these elements all appear perfectly logical and important to consider, they are difficult to reproduce and quantify. As a result, content analyses of television news often rely either on transcripts of texts, headlines and captions (Hall, 1981; Müller et al., 2012; Wilkes, 2015) or only on rough categories of visuals that can be easily measured (Coleman and Banning, 2006; Grabe and Bucy, 2009; Messaris and Abraham, 2001).

Recently, there have been several other attempts to elaborate a working model for analysing television news. Cottle and Matthews (2013) argue that an approach based on the frame analysis better fits the realities of television news. They broaden the concept of frames by adding new analytical dimensions to address the genres and peculiarities of that medium. However, as Tomaščíková (2010) has noted, there is another challenge in the analysis of television news, which is the proliferation of framing modes created by spoken and written lingual signs, still and moving images, graphics and music, all of which create a highly complex grid of analytical units that can rapidly become unmanageable.

Jones (2016) has refined Graber's model by organizing the research into three steps: deciphering the audio, deciphering the visuals and contextualizing the meaning production within the political economy of the media. Jones dubs this a triadic multimodal approach to the analysis of television news. Methodologically, Jones has stated her preferences for semiotic (deciphering the visual) and discourse (deciphering the audio and text elements) analysis. She suggests starting by distinguishing a narrative in news as a first step, then analysing the visuals used in the television news in a second step and finally drawing conclusions from the juxtaposition between audio and visuals and the context of media production in the third step.

As a result, to gain a detailed understanding of the strategic narratives in Russian television news, the present study employs a mixed-method approach. Following the definition of strategic narratives employed in this dissertation (strategic narrative as a set of media frames), my analytical framework draws mostly on the qualitative framing analysis of both textual and visual elements of news reports and on a quantitative approach. While the quantitative approach enables identification of the patterns and relational connections in the narratives, qualitative methods capture nuances in the interpretation of relational connections within and between the narratives. Thus, the complementary strengths of the two approaches call for a mixed-method design. In the next section, a description of a mixed-method model is presented.

4.2. METHODS OF DATA ANALYSIS

Drawing on work related to the analysis of television news (Berger, 2004; Graber, 2001, 2004; Shoemaker and Reese, 1996, 2014) and especially on Jones's (2016) model, I have developed a model that approaches a television news report as a whole product that consists of different threads; omitting even one thread would mean learning only part of the story. The model follows Jones in a way that it allows for a blend of the different tracks of television news, from audio and visual to the political economy of these texts. However, instead of focusing on semiotics and discourse analyses, this research methodology combines a visual and media frame analysis with quantitative analysis.

Building upon framing theory, I explore how the selected media portrayed actors and events related to the conflicts and what meanings were attached to or created about those key actors and events. Framing theory is based on the notion that the selective presentation of information impacts attitudes, decisions and behaviours (Chong and Druckman, 2007; Entman, 1993; Gitlin, 1980). Scholars have argued that framing choices are an essential part of journalistic routines (van Gorp, 2010), a natural construction embedded into the public communication process (Nisbet, 2010: p. 44) that is guided to some extent by ideology, newsworthiness and the context (Galtung and Ruge, 1965; Gitlin, 1980).

At the heart of the scientific debates on framing are the methods of operationalizing and measurement. Some scholars propose a deductive strategy in which the frames are predefined, theoretically based on and thus limited to a specific set (Matthes and Kohring, 2008). In contrast, researchers who employ inductive methods suggest using an open-coding strategy that enables finding the frames from the data and analysing the data in a more complete fashion (van Gorp, 2010). I have employed both strategies in this dissertation. In Articles I and IV, the inductive strategy is applied, while the deductive strategy is used in Article III to identify the frames in the data. In Article II, both strategies are applied; when relying on pre-existing knowledge and frame elements, I explored the texts to find and cluster other frames into overarching groups of ideas.

Visual framing is especially important in this research, not only because images have a powerful potential to influence the audience's processing and interpretation of a message (Domke et al., 2002; Krause and Bucy, 2018), but also because images provide us with the information about the values, mindsets and current political paradigms of the message sender (Kotilainen, 2011). Another reason why visual framing analysis is emphasized here is the ability of images to convey or evoke certain emotions. Emotions are crucial because they influence the interpretation of a message (Krause

and Bucy, 2018). In Article IV, the role of the emotions evoked by visuals in television news is explored and explained.

The quantitative analysis focuses on an exploration of significant facts like what, where and how many times a given element is visualized or reproduced in oral or written texts. These percentages and frequencies are used to measure relationships between variables. The news stories were examined quantitatively and qualitatively on three levels: 1) image subject (visual representation of the news story); 2) headline and textual framing and 3) immediate news discourse context, (the background audio or caption framing). The tags that Channel One uses to track its news on its website were used to study the main topics of the news stories.

To summarize, it is important to emphasize that this dissertation considers television news to be a multimodal construction, and, therefore, approaches all elements – visuals, written or spoken words and context – as equally important in the process of meaning-making and conveying a single message. Although visual studies and studies of strategic narratives are usually undertaken independently, this dissertation aims to synthesize them to study strategic narratives in television news. This is important because, besides television, our society is increasingly visual (Machin, 2014), especially with the latest information technologies like the internet and social media. The next section justifies the choice of sources of research material and provides insights into the political economy of the selected media.

4.3. SOURCES OF DATA

The websites of two Russian television channels – Channel One and RT (former Russia Today) – constitute the main sources of research materials for this dissertation. In addition, I use Twitter and the StopFake website as data sources to explore the reception of the allegedly fake news by Twitter users. Below I explain why I have chosen to select my data from these sources.

In the Russian media ecology, where the alternative voices have been marginalised (Hoskins & Shchelin, 2018), the traditional news media has retained its key role in bolstering pro-government narratives (Gaufman, 2019; Szostek, 2018). In 2014, when the crisis in Ukraine started to unfold, around 90% of Russians cited television as their main source of information (Levada Center, 2014) and 59% were likely to trust their source of information (Levada Center, 2016). Although the Russian television audience has decreased to 74% by 2020, television remains the dominant and most pervasive news distribution medium and enjoys a relatively high level of trust (48–57% depending on the news topic) (Levada Center, 2020).

Channel One (Pervyi Kanal) is technically only partly owned by the government, but it follows the Kremlin's line particularly closely (Tolz and

Teper, 2018). Prior to 2019, Channel One was the most watched channel in Russia, with around 80% of the domestic audience choosing it as their favourite information source (Levada Center, 2014b). Even though the channel remains one of the most popular sources of information in Russia, Channel One's audience has declined significantly in 2019; it is 47% of Russians who choose this channel as a source of information at the time of data collection. Other popular channels in Russia in 2019 were Rossia-1 and NTV with 48% and 36% of Russians preferring them over other information sources accordingly (Levada Center, 2019a). Based on the popularity and trust rating of Channel One among Russian viewers, Channel One has been selected as one of the main sources for the research material.

In addition, Russia has broadcast networks through which it echoes its strategic narratives abroad. For example, Channel One broadcasts globally through its Channel One Russia Worldwide company. It produces and distributes adapted versions of Channel One and themed channels to 250 million of viewers in 190 countries in CIS, Europe, America, Asia, the Middle East and claims to be the most widely distributed Russian-language media in the world⁴. NTV also has its international version - NTV-Mir, though it has not been updating its website since 2017⁵. While Channel One Russia Worldwide and NTV-Mir primarily target the Russian-speaking audience living abroad, the globally recognized **RT (previously Russia Today)** targets the international publics who do not necessarily speak Russian (Voronova, 2017). Therefore, to explore the strategic narratives from a comparative perspective, I selected RT to collect the research data.

Currently, RT has eight global round-the-clock TV channels and broadcasts in six languages. On its website, RT claims that it has a total weekly audience of 100 million viewers in 47 of 100+ countries globally, with the biggest part of the audience based in Europe⁶. Deidre et al. (2013) have similarly noted that, while the outlet might not be among the most highly watched, it is certainly among the five most important international news channels in terms of distribution and presence throughout Europe, including CNN International, BBC World News, Al Jazeera (English) and Euronews (English).

RT has been repeatedly criticized for producing pro-Kremlin propaganda. Hutchings and Szostek (2015) explored how RT and BBC World News interacted with their audiences on social media platforms during the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics and found that RT was uniquely skilled at turning daily events and the main topics discussed in Western online conversations into the narratives that subverted anything deemed

⁴ More about Channel One Russia Worldwide on <https://eng.1tv.com>

⁵ <http://ntvmir.ntv.ru>

⁶ More about RT on <https://www.rt.com/about-us/>

anti-Russian. Gessen (2014) and Szoldra (2014) pointed out that RT covered the events in Ukraine according to the Kremlin's strategic narratives.

The dissertation has the third, hybrid media, perspective. It is designed to extend our understanding of how strategic narratives advanced by traditional media circulate on the internet. My main focus was on the fake news which was broadcasted by Channel One to support the strategic narratives and debunked on the StopFake website. Therefore, for the hybrid media perspective, I collected the research data from StopFake website and Twitter.

StopFake (stopfake.org) was launched in March 2014 in Kyiv as a crowdsourced project to fight misinformation emanating primarily from Russian media and the internet. It started as an initiative of journalism students but was joined by other professionals and computer-savvy internet users from Ukraine and elsewhere. The community mobilizes ordinary internet users to engage in detecting and revealing fabricated stories and images on the Ukraine crisis through a 'Report a Fake' button. The website now operates in 13 languages and has more than 187,000 followers on multiple social media platforms.

Twitter is not an especially popular social network in Russia. Although the number of Twitter users in Russia is slowly growing, it remains only around 4% of the Russian population (Levada Center, 2019d); in 2014, it was around 3% (Levada Center, 2017). However, Twitter has been integrated into this study as one of the battlefields of information warfare. Zeitzoff (2014) holds that any (dis)information from governments, militaries or other official sources is met on Twitter with counter-propaganda campaigns. Additionally, and it is especially important for this dissertation, scholars widely recognize Twitter as a medium for public engagement with news that originates from mass media (Bruns and Burgess, 2015; Bruns et al., 2016; Hermida, 2010; Rambukkana, 2015).

4.4. THE DATA

This section provides a description of the research data used in this dissertation. Most data was collected with the help of the specially created computer code that retrieved all news reports from the selected sources according to the specific criteria. The criteria varied from study to study but mostly included the date and the tags or a search term like 'Ukraine' or 'Syria'. As a result, the dataset was constructed of the following information categories for every publication and a news report: (1) title, (2) full text of a news report or website publication, (3) date and time of publication, (4) tags, (5) original URL to access the visuals and (6) number of shares on social network platforms (available only for Channel One). To collect tweets, the followthehashtag.com service was used.

The data from all four sources were coded and analysed to provide the ground for the three perspectives adopted in the dissertation: comparative, retrospective and hybrid media.

Comparative perspective: While exploring the master narratives of Russia, I realized that they were all culturally and historically contextualized, and therefore, could potentially constitute a strong basis for the strategic narratives targeted at the **domestic** (Russian-speaking) audiences. However, I found it important to assess whether and how strategic narratives on Russian television would vary when they were broadcast to **foreign** audiences. For that, I assembled two datasets to analyze and compare. The first dataset consisted of the news aimed at the domestic (Russian-speaking) audience, and Channel One was selected as the data source. The second dataset consisted of the news aimed at the international (English-speaking) audience, and RT was selected as the data source. The news reports of both datasets were related to the Ukrainian crisis and released within the 14-month period from 1 December 2013 to 1 February 2015. The first dataset included 6927 news reports published on the Channel One website (www.1tv.ru). The second dataset included 1275 news reports published on the RT website (www.rt.com). I used the websites instead of television channels' records since it was technically easier to assemble the datasets. Ultimately, 1700 news stories (1239 from Channel One and 461 from RT) related to the crisis in Ukraine were sampled, coded and analysed.

The conclusions I drew from comparing the strategic narratives aimed at the different audiences inspired me to explore whether and how the strategic narratives advanced by one and the same channel for the same (domestic) audience would differ if they were related to **different international conflicts - the Ukraine crisis and the civil war in Syria**. Thus, I built two other datasets, consisting of 1232 and 2297 news reports related to the military conflicts in Syria and Ukraine, respectively, published on the Channel One website between 1 April 2014 and 31 March 2016.

Retrospective perspective: The Ukraine crisis changed the relationships between the countries (Russia and Ukraine) and people (living in these countries) rather abruptly. It gave ground and motivation for my retrospective sub-study: to identify how the conflict (re-)shaped the representation of the Ukrainian people in Russian news reports. For that, I examined the strategic narratives relating to Ukrainian people that circulated in the Russian television news both before and during the Ukraine crisis. The research material consists of news reports published on the Channel One website over a two-year time period consisting of two phases: stories from the pre-conflict phase (1 November 2012 – 31 October 2013) and stories from the period of the military confrontation (1 November 2013 – 31 October

2014). From the first phase, 383 news reports were collected, while 6963 news reports were gathered from the second phase, 7346 items a total. The assembled news reports were then filtered to generate a sample of the most shared or liked reports on the social media networks within a month of their publication (the Channel One website displays the numbers of shares and likes below each publication). As a result, 480 news reports were sampled and coded.

Hybrid media perspective: This perspective was designed to explore how engagement with the strategic narratives advanced by Russia's mainstream television news played out on social media networks. My goal was to examine how Twitter users judged the veracity of the news reports released by Channel One and contributed to the perpetuation of the strategic narratives. For that, I assembled two datasets. The first consisted of 6043 tweets produced by 5391 users in relation to the news stories broadcast by Channel One about the Ukraine crisis between 1 December 2013 and 1 February 2015. The second dataset consisted of 31 stories published on the Ukrainian fact-checking website StopFake (<https://www.stopfake.org>) that debunk the news broadcast by Channel One.

4.5. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The research ethics includes both legal regulations (non-maleficence regulations) and the requirements of objectivity. It is essential for any scholar to avoid inaccurate approaches in argumentation, analytical procedures or conclusions. It is thus important to be transparent and self-reflexive. In this dissertation, I worked with the media content, which demanded increased objectivity as I worked with the content deliberately constructed to influence and stir emotions. To avoid inaccuracy in coding and analysis, I used percentage agreement and Krippendorff's alpha (α). A second coder coded 20% of the samples to test the coding reliability. The results of the reliability testing indicated a high level of agreement between coders and did not exceed $\alpha = 0.84$.

As to the legal regulations, my biggest concern was the visuals used in the television news and as the data in my dissertation. Although my data did not involve any private information or interviews and the visuals were published on the television websites and thus publicly available, they nevertheless were primarily the images of private people. After consulting and reflecting on multiple sources concerned with the qualitative research ethics (Favaro et al., 2017; Iphofen and Tolich, 2018), I decided to approach the online open-access mainstream news sites as public spaces. I considered it reasonable to assume that individuals filmed for the news reports were informed by the journalists about why they were being filmed and where (the websites and television channel) those videos would be published.

Accordingly, I viewed it as ethically acceptable to collect and use these news reports as data without informed consent from those filmed in the reports.

At the same time, based on the understanding that the content had been created for an audience and context different from the academic research, I decided it would be more ethically appropriate to privilege adopting anonymizing measures and not to collect, store or publicly reveal any revealing or personal details attached to the videos. Thus, in addition to the open accessibility criteria, I decided not to publish in my articles any data which did not allow anonymization of characteristics of the people involved.

5. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

This chapter presents the findings arising from the data analysis. It is organized according to the dissertation's perspectives on the study of strategic narratives: comparative (section 5.1), retrospective (section 5.2) and hybrid media (section 5.3).

5.1. COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE: DOMESTIC NEWS VERSUS INTERNATIONAL NEWS AND THE UKRAINIAN CONFLICT VERSUS THE SYRIAN WAR

The empirical work from the comparative perspective resulted in two publications. The first (**Article I**) was published as a book chapter. Its objective was to examine whether and how the strategic narratives on the Russian television constructed around the Ukraine crisis differed when they were broadcast for the domestic as opposed to foreign audiences. Two sources of research material were selected: Channel One as a prominent news source for the domestic audience and RT as the main source for conveying the Russian strategic narratives abroad. The study collates quantitative and qualitative results based on the frequency of the media frames employed by these two TV channels.

In exploring the media frames, the study identifies how meanings are ascribed to certain events by placing them in the dominant narratives. The news reports were examined on three levels: visualization of the main character(s); visualization of the plot, headlines and textual framings; and the juxtaposition between audio and visuals and the context of media production. The tags on the Channel One website were used to study the main themes of the news reports.

Since both channels have been often criticized for being propaganda mouthpieces of the Russian government, there was no expectation that the channels would present the crisis in Ukraine neutrally and without bias. However, there was an assumption that the channels might employ different narratives to address their different audiences and try to accord with the specific cultural and social values of those audiences. The overall findings supported the idea that the news reports published on both channels' websites were presented in a way that reflected all three master narratives: the malicious intentions of the West against Russia, the crisis in Ukraine as a threat from fascism and an emphasis on the cultural and spiritual unity between Ukraine and Russia, with Russia the dominant figure in this unity.

There was considerable overlap in how both channels covered the crisis with respect to the strategic narratives. However, some frames were more persistent on one channel than on the other. Thus, while RT chose to

frame the crisis mostly within the Russia-versus-the-West strategic narrative, Channel One mostly appealed to the historical memory and to the spiritual and cultural commonality between Russia and Ukraine. RT more often employed the frames portraying the West (mostly visually represented by the US government members, but also EU officials) as interfering, biased and responsible for the political and economic turmoil in Ukraine and for the worsening relationship between Russia and Ukraine. Channel One portrayed Ukraine as a failing state beset by a growing radical nationalist (i.e., fascist) threat and economic troubles. Thus, the strategic narrative offered a shortcut to represent Crimea and the eastern regions of Ukraine desperately wishing to join Russia.

It is worth noting that RT mainly used photographs in its reports, whereas Channel One primarily used videos. The RT photos generally showed official figures, while Channel One's videos focused on ordinary people. While this difference in visualizing the conflict might invite a number of interpretations, I think that there are two main reasons. First, Channel One appeared to be attempting to contextualize the conflict with the audience's previous knowledge of the conflict itself and the countries involved. Second, and more importantly, this suggests that the conflict was supposed to evoke different emotions and shape different perceptions in different audiences. For the international audience, the conflict was presented from its non-humanitarian side, typically as vicious intrigues by the US against Russia. The domestic audience was shown emotional portrayals of suffering victims who were similar to the viewers. The findings also revealed that visuals did not necessarily correspond to the textual and audio descriptions – this was most obvious regarding Euromaidan, where many news reports had the titles and textual and/or spoken descriptions with the narrative about a fascist threat and disorder caused by the protestors, although the images presented peaceful protestors and smiling people. It invites us to think about what we actually *watch* on TV and accept as visual proof of a news report.

Article IV has been designed to explore the visual images used by Channel One to advance the strategic narratives around the military conflict in Ukraine and Russia's intervention into Syria's civil war. Although the legal, officially declared, status of engagement of Russia in these two conflicts is different, both conflicts have been accompanied by remarkable media campaigns in Russia to mobilize publics in support of the Kremlin's political decisions. The study compares the visuals used by Channel One to report on each of the conflicts and identifies how the visuals reproduce the strategic narratives.

Visual images, the article argues, bring emotional resonance to the strategic narrative. They provide the public with the emotional resources that are key for understanding complex political ideas and situations (Hariman

and Lucaites, 2007: p. 156; see also Hariman and Lucaites, 2002) and, on the other hand, anchor them in everyday discourse (Höijer, 2010) and collective memory (Zelizer, 1998). Accordingly, in this article, I conceptualise visual images as *affective anchors* that can be used to reactivate collective memory and dominant discourses and construct emotional relationships between audience and mediated events.

While focusing on the visuals, the analysis, however, does not dismiss the verbal elements in the news content. I apply framing analysis of audio and visual elements in Channel One' news reports, taking into account the combinations of text and verbal comments coming along with the visual images. In the analysis, I used four coding categories of visuals: key actors, visual display of suffering (or absence), visual display of the conflict/war (or battle aftermath), the main theme (interpretation of visuals through verbal comments) and sources of visuals. I used these coding categories for quantitative and qualitative analysis. Within the quantitative approach, I compared the patterns of visuals employed for reporting on different conflicts (focus on particular actors and themes). With the qualitative approach, I identified the presence of identity, issue and/or system narratives (Roselle et al., 2014; Miskimmon and O'Loughlin, 2017) and explored the frames which activated or neutralized the emotions as a part of legitimizing political decisions about involvement in the international conflicts.

The data showed that in the Ukraine crisis, Channel One's visual reporting focused on the suffering of civilians. Channel One repeatedly appropriated the trope of child and mother as a moral and emotional intensifier. The footage of mothers worked to stir up anger vis-à-vis the evil-doer who inflicted the suffering on their families. Even though the images of actual violent acts against civilians were not present in reporting, Channel One visualised the military aggression of the Ukrainian army through the focus on the battle aftermath (human consequences like injured, killed, suffering civilians or destroyed buildings or infrastructure) in the southeastern regions. The verbal comments in reports guided the interpretation of the visuals as the war of the fascist-minded Ukrainian government against the Russian-speaking population in Ukraine.

Visual reporting on the Syrian conflict converged around a narrow range of visual themes, dominated by the images of Russian weaponry. The military power of Russia then was constructed through showcasing their military arsenal. The reporting on the conflict represented what Kellner (1992) defined as a 'techno-war', void of images of suffering civilians and violent consequences of the war. Journalists' commentary underlined significantly improved Russian military capabilities and Russia's increasingly prominent status as a military power in the world. The military and technological might was enhanced by the references to the political and

military failures of the US and its allies. Within this frame, the Russian operation in Syria was represented as a noble mission of Russia to fight Islamic terrorism and US global hegemony (Teper 2018: 82)

Thus, the data revealed that Channel One used different affect stimuli while covering the conflict in Ukraine and the war in Syria. While the projection of Ukrainian conflict was anchored in compassion to the Eastern Ukraine population speaking the Russian language, the Syrian war was framed to fuel the feeling of national pride by focusing on the Russian greatness as a political and military superpower. The research extends the theoretical understanding about media representation of war, specifically how the changing political context impacts which identities are represented and made potent through appeals to different emotions. The article demonstrates that the strategic narratives are, thus, fluid in the sense that they can be modified and adapted to the political purposes and audience's expectations.

5.2. RETROSPECTIVE PERSPECTIVE: TRANSFORMATION OF STRATEGIC NARRATIVE WITHIN A TIME PERIOD

Article III explores how Russian television news has deconstructed the narrative embracing Ukrainians as 'brothers' through repositioning them within an imagined social reality wherein Ukrainians assume the guise of a threatening 'Other'. The media frames comprising visual, auditory and textual streams were analysed to explore the narratives about Ukrainians that were promulgated both a year before and a year after the Ukraine crisis started. To explore which group of Ukrainians was specifically 'othered' in the media, the study distinguished between two actors (characters) within the broader category of Ukrainians: ordinary people and the government or army. Ordinary people were subdivided into representatives of eastern Ukraine (the main locus of the violent conflict) and the rest of the Ukrainian population. At different stages of the conflict, the government category was represented by the cabinet of either Yanukovich or Poroshenko.

The findings highlight that Channel One manipulated the representations of Ukrainians to specifically appeal to the cultural, historical and spiritual values of the domestic Russian audience. Thus, prior to Euromaidan, Ukrainians were portrayed as a 'little brother' dependent on Russia's guidance and support but with shared origins and values. This narrative, emphasizing Ukraine as a fraternal but subordinate partner, was part of Russia's response to the identity crisis caused by the fall of the Soviet Union and aimed to reinforce Russia's position among neighbouring and post-Soviet countries (Miskimmon and O'Loughlin, 2017).

The transformation of this image began with the narrative of betrayal, wherein any political choice that did not favour Russia was interpreted as

irrational or misguided. However, the irrationality of Ukraine's political choice was not justification enough to mobilize the domestic audience around the Russian government's decision to send troops to Crimea, to annex Crimea and to support the war in eastern Ukraine. For that, a specific narrative that created a sense of real threat was required.

This sense of threat gained traction through the persistent focus on the violent nature of some radical groups' representatives and by demonizing those groups, which contributed to the portrayal of Euromaidan as Nazi riots. The fact that the image of fascism was already embedded in the public discourse relieved the media of the need to create a new ensemble of negative conceptions to describe the Other; the familiar images of fascism provided a shortcut to the desired public response. Thus, through constant references to fascism, the use of vocabulary and music that evoked World War II and the broadcast of documentaries about Nazi crimes, Channel One replaced Ukraine's original intention of developing closer ties with the EU with a narrative in which Ukraine turned away from Russia to embrace fascism, which is the ultimate evil from the perspective of the Russian-speaking public.

While reporting about war crimes, images of the enemy were not always present. The crimes ascribed to the enemy were generally represented only by text and in audio commentaries. The multimodality of television news permitted the media to ascribe certain meanings to these images through the complex grid of disparate yet interconnected frames comprising spoken and written lingual signs along with graphics and music. For example, the visual documentation of landscapes, destroyed houses and casualties was textually or orally interpreted as evidence of the crimes committed by the Ukrainian government and the army. The use of evocative music and references to the events of World War II in the news reports contributed to the creation of a framework within which Ukrainians were cast as reincarnated fascists.

5.3. HYBRID MEDIA PERSPECTIVE: CHALLENGING DOMINANT STRATEGIC NARRATIVES ONLINE

Article II places the emphasis on the internet, which allows other players to challenge the Kremlin's narratives by providing counter-narratives and debunking distorted information and fake images. Accounting for the new media ecology through which strategic narratives are interpreted, Article II scrutinizes first the narratives of allegedly fake news on Channel One, assuming the fabricated stories to be extreme projections of Russia's strategic narratives, and then the attempts of the Ukrainian fact-checking website Stopfake.org to counter the Russian narrative by refuting misinformation and exposing misleading images about Ukraine. Second, this

article analyses how Twitter users commented on the news and contributed to the wider discussion about television news. The sentiments contained in individual Russian-, Ukrainian- and English-language tweets were categorized as either explicitly trusting or distrusting the relevant news report.

The findings support the claim by Miskimmon et al. (2014) that strategic narratives are fragile in today's online environment. They can still exploit powerful symbolic resources and identity claims to create legitimacy, as Channel One does with regard to the Ukrainian conflict, but the internet makes it challenging to convince an audience or even limit the audience to within a country's borders. This article provides evidence that the strategic narratives projected by the popular information source no longer enjoy the same level of media dominance and, therefore, need to be constantly supported by new engaging stories to generate discussion and keep the focus of the audience on the topic. This may explain why Channel One produced a number of fake news stories and allowed inconsistencies in their reporting.

The analysis of the Twitter strand showed that online users, on the whole, are rather sceptical about the accuracy of the mainstream media strategic narratives from Russia. The tweets revealed that the users were aware of the strategic narratives deployed by Russia's TV. In addition, while they might adopt the terms offered by Channel One to describe the events and actors, they made clear that they distrusted Channel One and some of its content in particular. Some users also demonstrate their own ability to contribute to the debunking practices by pointing out inconsistencies in the details of a report, finding images that have been used to create allegedly fake news reports, using verification sources like webcams available on the internet or creating their own reports from the scene of an alleged event.

One of the important conclusions is that strategic narratives do not always aim to make a rational point; in contrast to the claims by Miskimmon et al. (2014), the power of strategic narratives does not solely rest on their credibility. The strategic narratives carried by Channel One's journalistically dubious stories seek, in the first place, to appeal to emotions and to blur the border between what is real and what is not. This kind of reports forms a context in which other messages can be communicated with greater ease (cf. Oates, 2014; Pomerantsev, 2014). At the same time, strategic narratives are conditioned by a diffused media ecology in which narratives are evaluated and discussed by any number of political actors and the general public. Even though the internet community in Russia is not as large or active as in the US or other Western countries, the study shows that even Russia cannot avoid the consequences of this growing trend. Especially during conflicts, which provide fertile territory for controversy and suspicion to arise, the internet provides ample opportunities for debunking falsehoods and producing counter-narratives.

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The crisis in Ukraine has revealed that Russia's mainstream media is increasingly instrumentalized in information warfare to mobilize (domestic and international) public support for the Kremlin's foreign policies, including the annexation of Crimea and engagement, despite official denials, in the military conflict in eastern Ukraine. The media has also been used to convincingly represent the reasons for the human and financial costs related to Russia's intervention in Syria. Still, a comprehensive and longitudinal investigation of Russian strategic narratives as a representation of weaponized information has been lacking, and this dissertation is intended to fill this void. It explores dominant Russian strategic narratives over two years and assesses their development and advancement over time, as well as the variations they have undergone depending on the conflict, target audience and political context. This final chapter offers a discussion of the main findings (section 6.1), reflections on the challenges and limitations of this research (section 6.2) and conclusions (sub-chapter 6.3).

6.1. MAIN FINDINGS

6.1.1. IMPORTANT ASSET IN INFORMATION WARFARE

The literature emphasizes that in order to be effective the strategic narratives must resonate with the values, expectations and prejudices of the intended audiences at a given moment in history (Freedman, 2006; Riessman, 2008). Indeed, the cultural and historical context of Russia is reflected in the dominant strategic narratives. They show that the perception of the hostility of Western states has originated in Cold War confrontations, that superiority of Russian statehood over other, 'little brother' nations can be traced to the politics of the Soviet Union and that the idea of a fascist threat spreading in Ukraine draws on the horrific experiences of both nations - Russia and Ukraine - in World War II. The analysis of the data has revealed that these historical references have been intensively exploited to strategically (re-)present the conflicts and main actors throughout the selected news reports.

Strategic narratives have proven to be a valuable asset in information warfare. The fabricated news that was studied from the hybrid media perspective (**Article II**) appeared to be the distillations of the dominant strategic narratives. The diffuse media environment in which the contemporary propaganda campaigns are constructed requires continuous engagement and support of the strategic narratives to cope with numerous opinions and rapidly changing news and to maintain their ability to shape the

perception of emerging events for multiple audiences (Miskimmon et al., 2014). In this light, fabricated and bizarre news reports circulating widely on the internet can be understood as agitation propaganda designed to provoke an affective response from the public. In Russia, as we have observed, where most people watch television and television is largely controlled by the government, fake news accomplishes its goal quite successfully. Thus, fake news becomes a part or sometimes even an ultimate expression of the strategic narratives integrated with the purpose to increase the public debate around particular themes and, most importantly, to create a specific *feeling* about these themes.

Although the internet in Russia is nowhere near television in terms of popularity when it comes to information function, especially among older people, pollsters report that it is on pace to become a more powerful participant in the media landscape (Chapter 2). The Russian government is aware of this trend and tries to reach the public through superficial social media accounts and websites (trolls) that amplify the government's strategic narratives online (section 2.3). Therefore, it was something of a surprise to learn that Twitter users in Russia did not always share their compatriots' preferences to television news as the information source in general and to Channel One in particular. From the hybrid media perspective, I explored how Channel One's fake news as the extreme projection of Russia's strategic narratives was perceived by Twitter users. The content analysis of tweets showed a comparatively high level of distrust regarding the news from Channel One (50.7 % of all tweets). The strongest emotions in tweets were sarcasm and then disgust targeted at the Russian propaganda on Channel One in general or at the content of a specific news report in particular. Sarcastic remarks were made with the intention of making the bizarre nature of the news conspicuous.

The study of fake news (**Article II**) also demonstrates that the dominant strategic narratives use plain, emotional language and direct parallels with historical events and actors. Through parallels with the powerful historical events, the narratives imbue well organized and simplified meanings to the current events. This kind of meanings is easy to communicate, comprehend and remember not only because it reflects and fits in the existing shared value system but also – and especially – due to the structure of the strategic narratives, which includes a simplified plot and characters' roles and direct and emotionally powerful parallels with the traumatizing parts of shared historical memory and public identities.

6.1.2. FLUID CONSTRUCTION OF STRATEGIC NARRATIVES

Strategic narrative is not static. Since it has arisen and proved to be effective, it continues to evolve over time with changes in the political context, international relations and target audiences. There is a lack of evidence in

existing research on whether and how a strategic narrative is modified to reflect the changing conditions. This dissertation contributes to the literature by focusing on how strategic narratives vary depending on the target audience and conflict, how they evolve over time and, especially, how the mass media can reflect and contribute to changes in the relationship between two or more countries.

Article III revealed not only the temporal acceleration but also the temporal fragility of strategic narratives. The apparently settled meaning of past events can be disrupted by the emergence of new conditions or changes in the political context that force a reconsideration of the dominant strategic narrative. Specifically, the study revealed a dramatic change in the role that Ukrainians played in the dominant Russian strategic narrative prior to and after the Ukraine crisis started. Prior to the Ukraine crisis, the Russian media ascribed to Ukrainians qualities that emphasized their spiritual and cultural similarity to Russians, ties of 'brotherhood' and political unity. For decades, these similarities were strategically exploited to develop a narrative in which Ukrainians were routinely portrayed as a part of the in-group. However, after Euromaidan, the image of Ukrainians in the Russian media was radically altered. In place of a narrative depicting a dependent little brother, a new strategic narrative emphasizing Ukrainians' dehumanized Otherness took shape. Thus, changes in the role of one of the main characters impacted the plot of the strategic narrative related to the conflict between Ukraine and Russia.

The threatening otherness of Ukrainians was shaped with the help of the World War II cult. Vuorinen (2012: p. 5) emphasizes that to be convincing the enemy's image must be 'easily recognisable, openly threatening, rationally or at least pseudo-rationally justifiable, and emotionally touching'. The fact that the image of fascism was already deeply embedded in the public discourse relieved the media of the need to create a new ensemble of negative conceptions to describe the Other. The familiar images of fascism offered a shortcut to the desired public response. Thus, **Article III** demonstrated how through constant references to fascism, the use of vocabulary and music evocative of World War II and the broadcast of documentaries about Nazi crimes, Channel One gradually replaced Ukraine's original intention of developing closer ties with the EU with a narrative in which Ukraine turned away from Russia to embrace fascism, the ultimate evil from the perspective of the Russian-speaking public. This image of Ukrainians and Ukraine was used to create the feeling of the threat and, consequently, represented Crimea and Ukraine eastern regions as being in distress and expecting the involvement of Russia to save the Russian-speaking population. The research results demonstrate not only that strategic narratives are fluid and adaptive to the context, but also *how* the process of transformation of one narrative into another occurs.

The volatility of strategic narratives has been also revealed from the comparative perspective of the dissertation. **Articles I** and **IV** showed that links between the national imagination and narrative conventions varied accordingly. To demonstrate this, **Article IV** provided a comparative analysis of the strategic narratives that Channel One used to inform the domestic audience about two conflicts at roughly the same period of time. The strategic narrative explaining Russia's political approach to the military conflict in eastern Ukraine and engagement in Syria highlighted different parts of the collective Russian identity. The analysis revealed that Channel One used different affective and emotional stimuli in covering the conflict in Ukraine and the war in Syria. While the Ukrainian conflict was constructed around feelings of empathy for the Russian-speaking population of eastern Ukraine, the Syrian war was represented by reinforcing the sense of Russia's greatness as a political and military power. The strategic narrative around the Ukrainian conflict was almost entirely based on personal testimonies (up to 86% of all sampled reports), but the Syrian war was narrated through the figures, maps and statistics to reinforce the sense of distance as it was formulated in Wolfsfeld et al.'s definition of defensive mode (2008). The focus on human suffering in the reports on the Ukrainian conflict was established through language and images that recalled World War II, and the focus on Russia as a reawakening great power and indispensable international actor in the reports on the war in Syria was established through Cold War rhetoric.

The analysis of the news related to one and the same conflict – the Ukraine crisis – but broadcast to different audiences – domestic and international – supported the idea that the news was constructed according to the existing narratives that could be modified depending on the specific characteristics of an audience. Although the findings in **Article I** do not demonstrate significant differences between the strategic narratives employed for different audiences, they nevertheless reveal that the news emphasizes different aspects when addressing different audiences. Thus, while Channel One appealed to the traumatic memories related to World War II in shaping a narrative of the Ukraine crisis for the domestic audience, that same crisis was framed by RT for the international audience as a confrontation between Russia and the West. These findings also resonate with the argument by Dimitrova et al. (2005), which suggests that even although news can be anticipated to be consumed by a global audience, it is constructed according to the political, economic and social fabric of the news producer.

6.1.3. DIFFERENTIATED VISIBILITIES

Despite the prominence of state-sponsored television in Russia's media and political landscapes, the visuals embedded in Russian television news have

received surprisingly little scholarly attention to date. This dissertation fills this gap by exploring the role of visuals in advancing strategic narratives in television news. In reviewing a large amount of visual material, the most striking discovery was that visuals employed in news reports did not always represent justifications for the narratives emphasized in the headlines or captions, whether spoken or written. The headlines were sometimes inappropriately illustrated with the pictures of politicians (RT) or landscapes (Channel One) instead of visualizing the correspondent's stories of the conflict. In addition, RT often invited international experts supportive of Russian government policy to expound on the key narratives. Channel One, on the other hand, illustrated its news reports about the events in Ukraine with the episodes of historical documentaries about World War II, including original sound effects and music, as **Articles I** and **III** demonstrated.

Furthermore, the comparative analysis of the visuals on Channel One and RT revealed that Channel One typically visualized the Ukrainian conflict by using emotional videos depicting personal stories and civilian suffering. The main actors who received prominent visibility in Channel One reports about the crisis were civilians, the Russian-speaking eastern Ukrainians mostly represented by women with children or families, as **Articles I** and **IV** showed. RT avoided visualizing scenes of the events and suffering of people; it mostly used still pictures of officials and political leaders (**Article I**). Interestingly, Channel One gave almost no visibility to Syrian civilians and their suffering while covering the war in Syria. The most visible actors were Russian officials and the central visualized theme: Russian military equipment (**Article IV**). Given the importance of military strength in Russia's self-perception as a great power, it was not a surprise that Channel One emphasized Russian military might, which was deployed in the area of conflict.

Before the strategic narrative that positioned Ukrainians as threatening others was constructed, Channel One had advanced a narrative focusing on the fraternal relationship between Russians and Ukrainians. The ties of brotherhood were depicted by focusing on Ukrainians speaking Russian and accompanied by symbols referring to the people's common history and Orthodox religion. The close relationship between the countries was also visualized by images of presidents, government members, military officers and clergy of both countries participating in significant rituals, including church services, wreath-laying ceremonies at World War II monuments, joint military exercises and official declarations delivered with national flags as a backdrop (**Article III**).

The data analysis distinguished a different narrative concerning those Ukrainians who did not support Euromaidan but rather sought closer cooperation with Russia. Pro-Russia Ukrainians were represented by two groups: refugees and rebels from eastern Ukraine who believed they needed

to protect their families and land from Ukrainian nationalists. The refugees presented were mostly women with children who had left their homes in Ukraine and fled to Russia. The separatists were visually represented by men in camouflage. Both refugees and rebels spoke Russian and were portrayed as sharing Russia's cultural and ideological values. The images of the refugees were supported with references to the number of casualties with a focus on killed or wounded children and the aid provided by the Russian government and private Russian people to the Ukrainian refugees. Thus, as **Articles III and IV** revealed, the image of the ordinary Ukrainian was bifurcated. News reports visualized a nationalist-minded and Russophobic Ukrainian while simultaneously promulgating a heroic image of the oppressed Russian-speaking Ukrainian. It must be emphasized that news coverage did not portray pro-Russia Ukrainians as part of the in-group: they were still very much Others, but they were portrayed with a significant degree of sympathy.

The findings showed that visuals were selected to accord with the strategic narratives. It is even more accurate to say that the visibility of certain actors and themes was constructed to follow the strategic narratives. Any themes and actors that could not be depicted for some reasons but were important parts of the strategic narratives were made salient through textual or oral interpretation and sound effects like special war-related popular songs and documentaries. The most powerful example is the visualization of the crimes ascribed to the Ukrainian army. As **Article IV** revealed, there was not a single image of Ukrainian soldiers attacking self-defence combatants or civilians. Instead, the images of consequences like destruction and the personal stories of victims and refugees were presented with the text or voice comments as the results of the war crimes committed by the Ukrainian army. These images represented suffering and devastation, provoking moral judgment and powerful emotional response.

6.2. CRITICAL REFLECTION: LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY AND QUESTIONS FOR FUTURE STUDIES

I acknowledge that this research has limitations. First, like many researchers working with moving images, I had to confront the **methodological challenges** related to the semiotic complexity of visual materials. Television news is a multi-semiotic and multimodal construction that requires a researcher to consider both verbal and non-verbal components, including symbols, sounds and music. Since my initial aim was to investigate how strategic narratives persisted or changed over the course of international crises and in different contexts, I needed to analyse a comparatively large amount of data. Thus, I had to select a very limited number of news elements for analysis. The selection of an item, even when a conscious choice, implies

abandoning some elements in favour of others. As a result, it is not possible to ascertain the legitimacy, 'veracity' or completeness of the findings. Finally, since there was no established methodology to analyse television news, I decided to adopt a combination of multimodal methodologies, integrating verbal and non-verbal elements as equals that constituted a consistent product – a news report – in which non-verbal elements were assessed, contextualized and interpreted in dialogue with the verbal data.

Furthermore, my focus in this dissertation was on exploring strategic narratives as such rather than on strategic narrative producers: governments, political leaders, media or non-governmental actors. Thus, my empirical material is limited to the content of television news. It says little about the actual processes behind producing the strategic narratives depicted in the news. Future studies of strategic narratives should therefore include empirical data about the **news production process and how journalists and editors perceive their roles in that process**. The study also does not include data on **direct audience effects** of the framing of conflicts in strategic narratives. This should be followed up in forthcoming studies. Future research could also cover media outlets with an **alternative political position** in Russia, like the Dozhd television channel and *Novaya Gazeta* newspaper. I am also interested in continuing research from the hybrid media perspective on strategic narratives and exploring television news that goes viral online by being shared and discussed on social networks. The **online discussions** around the news produced by the mainstream media might be a fruitful area to investigate.

6.3. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Strategic narrative is a complex, many-faceted phenomenon. Over the past few decades, scholars in media studies, political communications and international relations have extended our knowledge of the formation, projection and reception of strategic narratives (Freedman, 2006; Miskimmon et al., 2013; Roselle et al., 2014; Szostek, 2016). However, many of the important existing findings concern how strategic narratives impact the power transition, domestic and international legitimacy and the construction or recognition of one's own or others' identities. This dissertation contributes to the literature by examining *how* strategic narratives evolve over time and, specifically, *how* the mass media contributes to and reflects the changing relationship between countries. These insights answer, in part, Miskimmon et al.'s (2017) call for research on strategic narratives to examine the role of media in shaping the meaning of events and Arsenault et al.'s (2017) call for the analysis of the role of the media in strategic narrative promotion and legitimation. The findings of this

dissertation reveal that strategic narratives are a fluid construction that is constantly being modified to suit changing political purposes.

It is notable that there is growing scepticism about conventional media outlets on the internet. However, according to the data, the rhetoric used to express scepticism is also based on the terms of strategic narratives. This leads to the conclusion that – although the communication environment can change – the information consumption habits and engagement with television news are not changing very fast in Russia. Moreover, in comparison with other developed and more liberal countries, the Russian media environment empowers traditional actors like the national media and government officials. This provides a basis for Russia to use strategic narratives as a weapon in an ideological confrontation, whether inside the country or beyond its borders.

The empirical analysis of news reports indicated that strategic narratives were crucial in how television channels framed and represented the conflicts in Ukraine and Syria. The narratives outlined were kept prominent with the help of the themes, plots and characters' roles that the channels chose to communicate about the conflicts. Theoretically, then, this research deepens our understanding, from comparative, retrospective and hybrid media perspectives, of how significant events like international conflicts are constructed in accordance with political purposes and expectations, experiences and values of the target audience(s). The empirical data show how the mainstream media interprets the same conflict to different audiences or different conflicts to the same audience, how the media modify a narrative if international relations change and how the media (try to) support strategic narratives in the new media ecology. The analysis of the news has shown how the most important state-run channels contribute to the understanding of the contemporary information war and how Russia employs strategic narratives targeted at domestic and foreign media audiences.

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